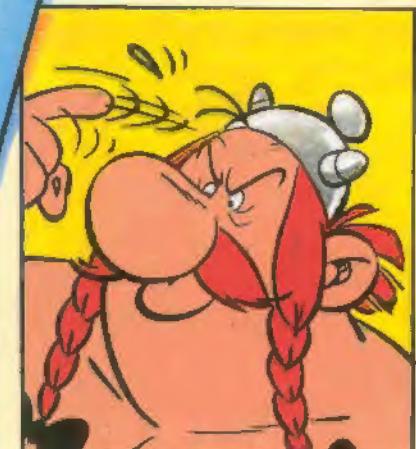
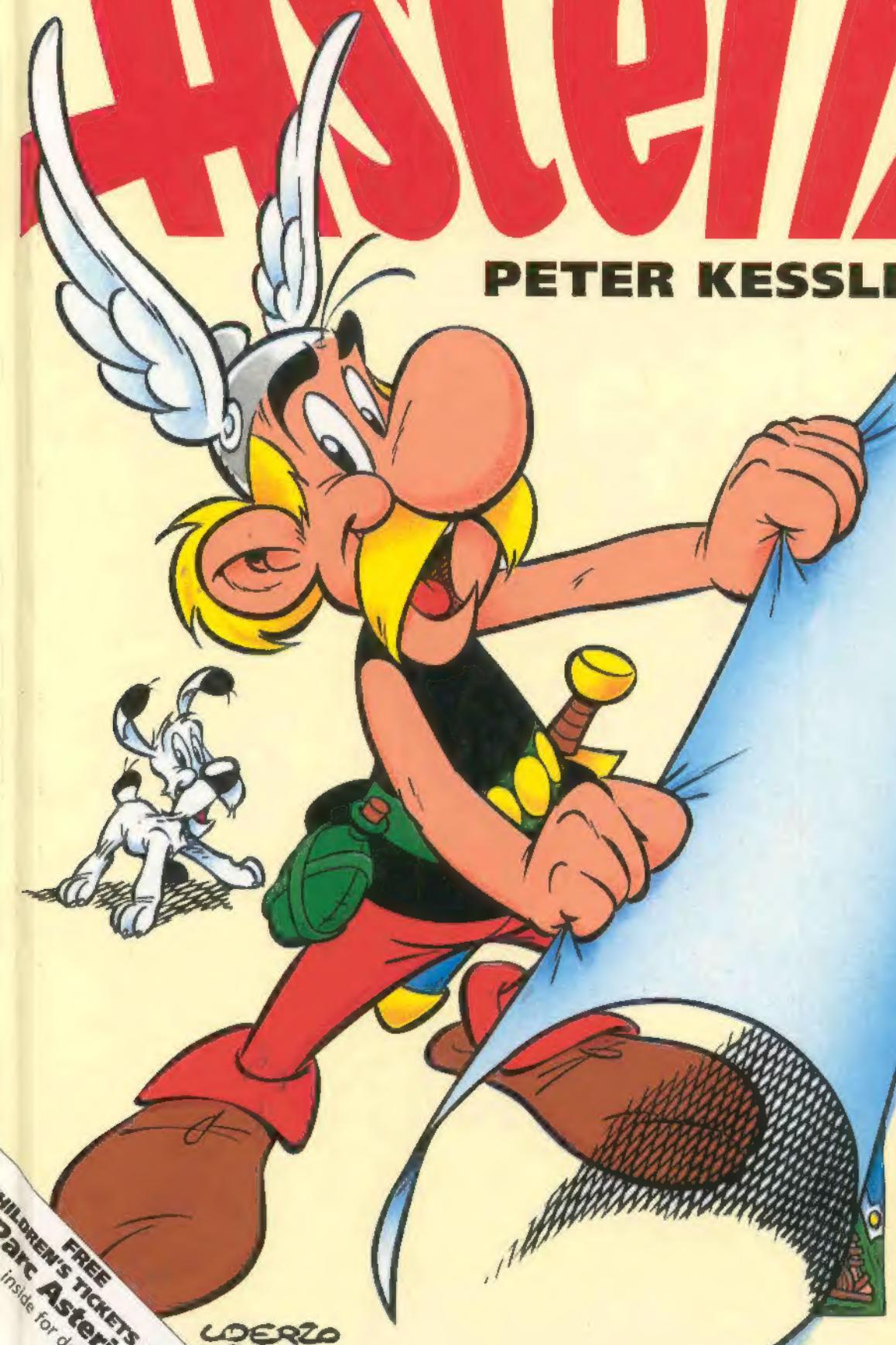


THE COMPLETE GUIDE

TO

# ASTERIX®

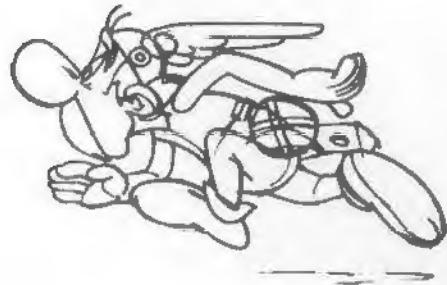
PETER KESSLER



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COERZO

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# FOREWORD BY ALBERT UDERZO

In ONE BEAUTIFUL summer morning in 1959, René Goscinny and I had been told that, one day, somebody would publish a book exploring the adventures of a little Gaul we had just created, I think, after initial amazement, we would have burst out laughing, slapped our thighs and our foreheads like good old Obelix does so often, and said, 'They must be crazy . . .!'

But now, almost thirty five years later, having slowly, if not completely, matured, and having given much thought to the meaning of life and the constant fluctuation of broccoli on the Stock Exchange, I no longer feel like laughing. Rather, I congratulate the author and publisher of this book for having thought of it. Apart from the fact that this interesting and rewarding analysis will lead to a better understanding of the Asterixian saga, I quite selfishly admit that the guide will be a very useful tool for me in the future wanderings I intend to make in the humorous Gallo-Roman world . . . Toutatis willing!

It is difficult for the reader to imagine the anxiety which overcomes the author facing the risk of repetition or duplication. In my case, whenever I can't be sure – and due to my failing memory that often happens – I spend a considerable amount of time reconsulting the twenty-nine albums in this collection which, as everyone knows, consists of about thirteen thousand illustrations in which an incalculable number of characters appear . . . all that work so I can be sure that a name ending with *-ix*, or *-us*, or *-is*, or *-os* or *-ax* has not already been used, that a character has not already been drawn, that a particular event has not already taken place, that a Latin quotation has not already been quoted, etc, etc.

As one of our Roman characters, whose name I have of course forgotten, must surely have said, '*Bis repetita non placent.*' (see page 102). Once again, I extend my congratulations to Peter Kessler, the author of this book, which has been so difficult to compile, and I say to him '*Ad augusta per angusta*'. He will understand.



# INTRODUCTION

**I**F YOU LIKE ASTERIX, you are about to enjoy yourself.

For the first time, you are going to learn the origin of one of the world's most popular cartoon characters. And you are going to be treated to a grab-bag of Asterix information, from a book-by-book analysis of the whole series, to arcane facts that throw new light on the behaviour of your favourite Gaul. (For instance, did you know that the historical ancient Gauls really were afraid that the sky would fall on their heads? During thunderstorms they used to shoot arrows into the sky to stop it dropping down.)

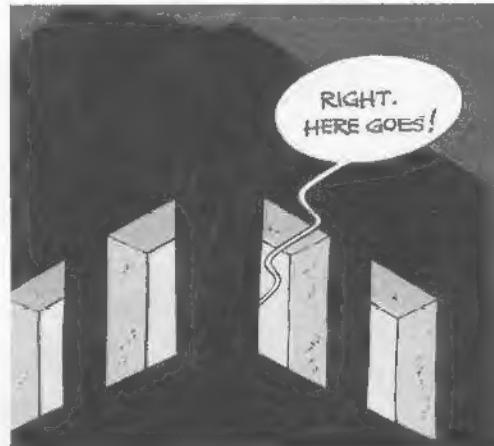
But that is not all. *The Complete Guide to Asterix* contains some very special extras.

Between each chapter you will find revealing Bonus Sections on topics like the real contents of the magic potion, or Goscinny and Uderzo's concealed appearances in Asterix's adventures. There are special features on how Asterix books are created, and why big noses are so important in Ancient Gaul.

There is even a glossary that explains all those Latin phrases you used to skip over because you couldn't understand them.

Albert Uderzo himself has supplied many comments, and I would like to thank him on three major counts: for giving his permission to write this book in the first place; for supplying the foreword you have just read; and for submitting himself to a detailed interrogation at my hands.

So what are we waiting for? Let's keep the introduction short and get on to the good stuff . . .





Uderzo and Goscinny at work





# ALL GAUL IS CONQUERED

## THE ORIGIN OF ASTERIX

**A**STERIX first appeared to the French comic-reading public in October 1959. But his true origins go back several years before that. One thousand five hundred and seven years, to be precise, to AD 452.

At that time Attila the Hun was devastating large areas of northern Italy, including a small village near Venice. A village called Uderzo.

Unfortunately the village of Uderzo was not as good at holding out against invaders as Asterix's village, and Attila's hordes laid waste to the place. When its scattered survivors returned to the ruins of their homes however, they found a baby still alive. No one knew its name, so they named it after the village, which still exists today (now named Oderzo).

That baby was of course Albert Uderzo's distant ancestor, and if not for a momentary oversight by a rampaging fifth-century barbarian, Asterix the Gaul would never have been created.

René Goscinny's father was French, but his mother came from a small, Jewish *shtetl* in the Ukraine. She fled Russia after repeated pogroms, and her village itself has long since vanished.

Although they were not thinking of their backgrounds when they created Asterix, both Goscinny and Uderzo have connections with villages destroyed by invaders. Perhaps the authors' own family histories subconsciously helped them to imbue Asterix's village with its deep love of liberty.

Albert Uderzo, artist and co-creator of Asterix, was born in France in 1927. His parents had recently moved from Italy – so recently in fact that Uderzo's birth certificate actually names him 'Alberto'. (His father was still accustomed to adding an *o* to male names, and made a mistake when talking to the birth registrar.)

As well as one extra *o*, Uderzo was also born with two extra fingers, which were surgically removed when he was still young.

He showed a great aptitude for art from a very early age. Even at infant





One of Uderzo's earliest cartoons

school his teacher noticed his ability. But although he enjoyed drawing enormously, Uderzo's ambition as a child was to become an aircraft mechanic.

René Goscinny, the original writer and the other co-creator of Asterix, was born a few months before Uderzo, in 1926. When he was two his family moved to Argentina, where his father, a chemical engineer, had been offered a job.

As a child, Goscinny also showed his talent for storytelling. He would make up stories and recount them to his family and friends, making them laugh with a variety of funny faces.

One of Goscinny's first jobs was as an artist in an advertising agency. But he had difficulty conforming to the wishes of his employer: 'My first assignment was to design a label for olive oil bottles. I drew some olives. Our client wanted a naked woman. I couldn't see the connection . . . the simple fact was that he liked naked women better than olives. I decided it looked as though advertising had its problems.'<sup>11</sup>



Uderzo meanwhile was having his own problems back in France. His family, realising that he had an extraordinary talent, invested in some art lessons. But as soon as Albert started using coloured paints, it became apparent that he was colour-blind. 'The effect was disastrous! One day at home I drew a field with some coloured pencils, and my mother said, "But why have you made the grass red?" Since then fortunately my eye has improved, and on the covers of the Asterix books, Asterix's red trousers and the green grass that surrounds him are all my own.'<sup>12</sup>

This was during the Second World War, and France was occupied by the German army. To avoid being pressed into service by the Nazis, Uderzo's brother Bruno managed to obtain false papers and left Paris for a while. Albert accompanied him, and together they spent a year of anonymity in Brittany – or as it was known in Roman times, Armorica, the location of Asterix's village.

Uderzo loved Brittany, both for its scenery and its people. Later he described the Bretons as 'people with heart and generous characters, who are always happy'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, many years later, when the time came to choose a location for the Gaulish Village, Goscinny left the decision entirely to Uderzo, only stipulating that it should be near the sea in case the characters needed to travel by boat. Uderzo had no hesitation in choosing Brittany.

Back on the other side of the Atlantic, the nineteen-year-old Goscinny was still searching for some satisfying line of work. An uncle of his who lived in New York suggested that he come to North America, and René leaped at the chance: America! Fred Astaire, the movies, Walt Disney and . . .

. . . Moroccan import-export firms, one of which gave Goscinny the job of interpreter. This was hardly the sort of employment he had been hoping for, especially since his command of English extended no further than three lines of Coleridge, a quotation from Shakespeare, and a less than useful phrase about his table being under the ceiling and on the floor.

After the war, Goscinny finally decided to embark on a career as a humourist. He struggled, with no success, until 1948, when he met a group of cartoonists who would later go on to create *MAD Magazine*. Still going strong today, *MAD* was conceived as a comic book that could poke fun at contemporary American life. What united the *MAD* team was their belief that, rather than being the domain solely of children, comics could be aimed

*His family, realising that he had an extraordinary talent, invested in some art lessons. But as soon as Albert started using coloured paints, it became apparent that he was colour-blind*



at older readers – a revolutionary thought in 1948, but one that inspired Goscinny.

While with this team, Goscinny met Georges Troisfontaines, a Belgian comics publisher on a business trip to New York. Troisfontaines casually invited Goscinny to show him some of his work if he happened to be visiting Brussels.

Goscinny did not need to be asked twice. He longed for his homeland, so he swapped the cartoon for the *bande dessinée* (the French equivalent), and set off for Europe . . .

. . . Europe, where Albert Uderzo was beginning to forge a successful career as an artist in post-war Paris. Among the many cartoon characters he

### Personnage N°1 : CLOPINARD



NATURE : Ancien Grognard de Napoléon. Vagabond de nos jours  
CARACTÉRISTIQUES : Epais sourcils noirs et barbe blanche. Yeux louches. Jambe de bois à ressort  
CARACTÈRE : Gaie - très malin. Courageux à part le travail  
Création : A. UDERZO



Service Technique

Clopinard



created at this time was Clopinard. Clopinard was an unlikely hero: small, rather old, heavily moustachioed and one-legged. In fact there are glimmerings of Asterix, or even Geriatrix, in this character: the little man who triumphs against the odds.

12

In 1950 Uderzo, like Goscinny, met Georges Troisfontaines. Trois-

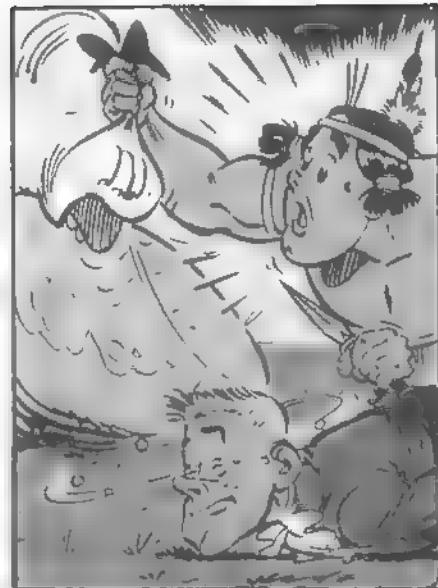
fontaines' Belgian company World Press was in the process of opening a Paris office, and Uderzo was installed as resident artist.

It was there that the two men finally met. Uderzo describes the situation: 'I was working there all alone at my desk, and one day I got a message: "You're going to have a little friend. He comes from the USA and he's called René Goscinny." I thought, Hey, *Gocini*, another Italian! He was very thin, and he already had a wonderful sense of humour and incredible energy. I couldn't speak English and he couldn't speak Italian, but I remember he did a marvellous impression of a non-English-speaking Italian in New York – with a perfect Neapolitan accent.'<sup>4</sup>

Goscinny and Uderzo quickly realised that they might be able to work as a team. Goscinny preferred scenarios and scripts, whereas Uderzo was far happier concentrating on art. They were united by their taste in comedy and their capacity for large amounts of work. Uderzo suggested an alliance soon after they had met, and they never looked back.

One of the first strips Goscinny and Uderzo invented together was called *Oumpah-Pah*, and it is often seen as the true forerunner of Asterix.<sup>5</sup>

Set in eighteenth-century North America, *Oumpah-Pah* was the story of a native American tribe. The central character was Oumpah-Pah, a large, naive, gentle warrior who became a scout for the French army in America.



Oumpah-Pah



Oumpah-Pah's attacking tribe clearly prefigures many Gaulish raids on Roman camps

To complement Oumpah-Pah's simple, natural approach to life, the authors invented a 'sophisticated' partner for him – the young French officer Hubert de la Pâte Feuilletée. The humour, style and situations in this series were very 'Asterixian', with bands of undisciplined, rowdy Indians overcoming the ordered ranks of their invaders.



As if to underline this relationship, Oumpah-Pah makes one fleeting appearance in an Asterix book. He can be spotted on the far left of page 17 in *The Twelve Tasks of Asterix*.

After five successful years with World Press, Goscinny and Uderzo set up their own company, called Edifrance.



The Edifrance office with Uderzo, bottom left, and Goscinny at his typewriter, top right

Edifrance was not a publishing house. It was more like a writer/artist collective, and it struggled for three years until 1959, when a major opportunity appeared in the shape of Radio Luxembourg.

Radio Luxembourg wanted to sponsor a new kind of *bande dessinée*: one that was aimed specifically at older children. This was the perfect project for Goscinny and Uderzo.

The writers and artists themselves were to have total editorial control of the new magazine, with Goscinny as editor and Uderzo as artistic director. They intended that it 'would not be just for children, or even for adolescents, but would appeal to adults as well. After all, there's no special age for laughter'.<sup>6</sup>

The new magazine was a complete break with tradition, and its writers and artists saw it as the true way ahead for the *bande dessinée*, a guiding light



for the youth of France, a pilot through new adventures. And hence its name: *Pilote*.

The only problem left was: what on earth would they put in it?

## ASTERIX

**A**UGUST 1959. Preparations for issue number 1 of *Pilote* – due to appear in two months – were going well. Goscinny and Uderzo had come up with a great idea for a strip to work on together. It had all the ingredients they were looking for in their brave new venture: a French theme, a wealth of cultural references to please older readers, a lot of action to please younger readers, and the potential for longevity. Its name? The *Roman de Renart*.

The French folk-tale of Reynard the Fox had been well known since the Middle Ages 'Reynard was to the fox what Mickey was to the mouse', said Albert Uderzo, and it was part of the *Pilote* philosophy to show that France could create its own popular heroes. It didn't need America's hand-me-downs.

There were several spreads ready for printing when news reached Goscinny and Uderzo that their idea had already been done by cartoonist Jen Trubert. With less than two months to go, they had to come up with a totally new idea.

'René said to me, "Let's go through all the great periods of history", so I began in the Paleolithic era. When I arrived at the period of the Gauls, he stopped me.'<sup>8</sup>

Goscinny had a nose for comedy, and the humour he could sense here lay not in the Gaulish era *per se*, but in French school history lessons. For the French, the phrase '*nos ancêtres les Gaulois*' ('our ancestors the Gauls'), and the image of Vercingetorix laying his arms at Caesar's feet, are as familiar as 1066 is to the British [In fact the British comedy *1066 And All That* is close in spirit to the earliest conception of Asterix, because its comedy derives not from the historical events themselves, but from the way those events are understood and taught at school.]

Goscinny's first thought was, what if, instead of dropping his arms at



Pilote issue 1



Caesar's feet. Vercingetorix dropped them *on* Caesar's feet? It was a brilliant idea, because it poked fun at one of the noblest, most famous images in French history, one that every reader would understand.

Historically, Caesar is supposed to have made a great speech at this point, but 'for us you see Caesar did not say, "Thus thou art at last brought low before me, King of the Arverni. Thou upon whom I piled favours, and who betrayed me. Thou who hast profited from my teachings only to threaten my glory. Thou, whom I had honoured above all my officers, and who wast naught but a rebel . . ." No. In our version Caesar just goes "OUCH!"'



Alix, Aviorix, and Totorix. But Goscinny and Uderzo had not heard of them.

Uderzo's first sketches for Asterix show him as a traditional warrior: large, strong – an Oumpah-Pah.

Uderzo's earliest designs for Asterix



But Goscinny saw him more as a shrewd, pint-sized anti-hero. He wanted to get away from musclebound champions for whom the solution to

every problem was a good thump. Besides, valuing wit and intelligence above brute strength was far more appropriate for *Pilote*.

But Uderzo still felt that their small, wily hero would be well complemented by a large, dull companion, and Goscinny agreed. So Obelix was born.

On the 29 October 1959 *Pilote* was launched with the help of twenty-four hours of promotion on Radio Luxembourg. Asterix, a quirky, slightly anarchic, last-minute addition, was an instant hit.

## THE ASTERIX EXPLOSION

**H**ow does one get an idea like Asterix?

Goscinny: 'It's a question I've been agonising over for nearly a quarter of a century . . . I have tried the scientific approach: once, on the Métro, a good idea came to me just like that, out of the blue. It was sudden, fresh and not bad at all. After that I travelled on the Métro incessantly for a whole week, but I didn't get any more ideas. From that day on I gave up all hope in science. I also bought my first car.'<sup>10</sup>

After less than a year *Pilote* was in difficulties. Despite its popularity with readers, the financial backing dried up, and the magazine was taken over by Georges Dargaud, publisher of the French *Journal de Tintin*. Goscinny duly handed over the reins of editorship, and watched

*Pilote*'s sales plummet drastically in response to Dargaud's traditional, a-m-t-at-the-kids approach.

Dargaud persuaded Goscinny to return as joint editor with Jean-Michel Charlier, and he stayed in the job until 1974. During that period he dramatically improved writers' and artists' pay, and also gave many unconventional young cartoonists their first breaks, people like Bretécher, Gotlib and Mandryka, who would later go on to create their own highly successful magazines.<sup>11</sup>

But what of Asterix during all this?

Serialised on a weekly basis, he was proving extremely popular. And in 1961 the first adventure *Astérix le Gaulois* (*Asterix the Gaul*) appeared as a self-contained album. It only sold six thousand copies. But the second book *La*

*Despite its popularity with readers, the financial backing dried up, and Pilote was taken over by Georges Dargaud, publisher of the French Journal de Tintin*



*Serpe d'Or (Asterix and the Golden Sickle)* doubled that. Each volume improved on the last until 1965, when suddenly all France seemed to go Asterix-mad.

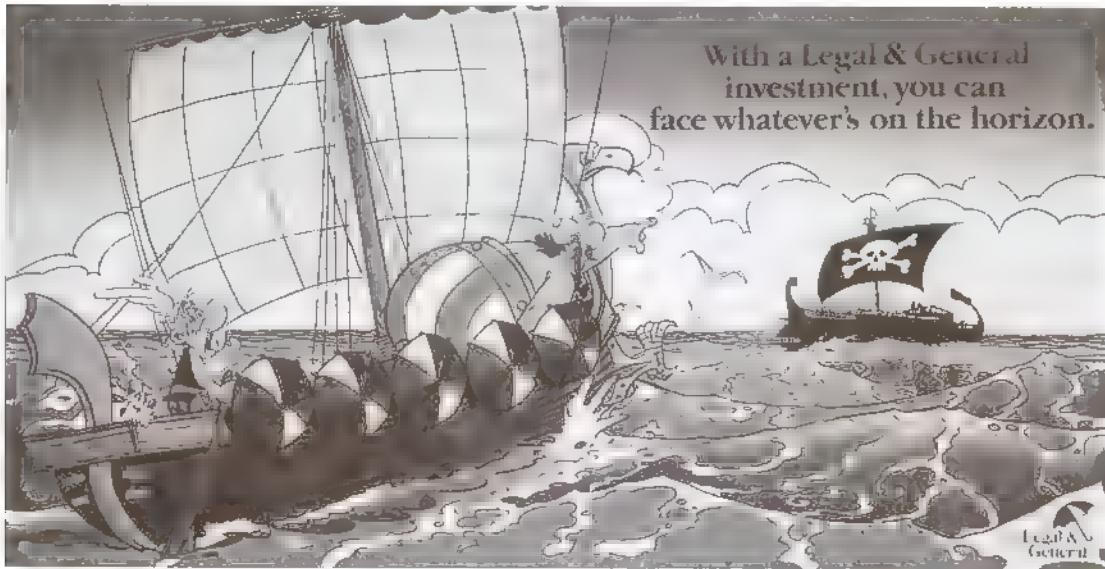
Nowadays even *Le Monde*, one of France's most respected newspapers, has a *bande dessinée* reviewer, and students can study the subject at university

best selling Asterix book in France). But sales rocketed into the hundreds of thousands. In that year the first French satellite was named *Asterix*. And in 1966 *Asterix and the Normans* sold over a million copies.

Coinciding with Asterix's popularity came a new respectability for the *bande dessinée*. The academic Centre d'Etude des Littératures d'Expression Graphique (Association for the Study of Graphic Literature) was set up. Exhibitions were mounted. Comics were made respectable. Nowadays even *Le Monde*, one of France's most respected newspapers, has a *bande dessinée* reviewer, and students can study the subject at university.

In France, unlike its close neighbour Britain, adults could admit to reading comics without fear of being thought childish.

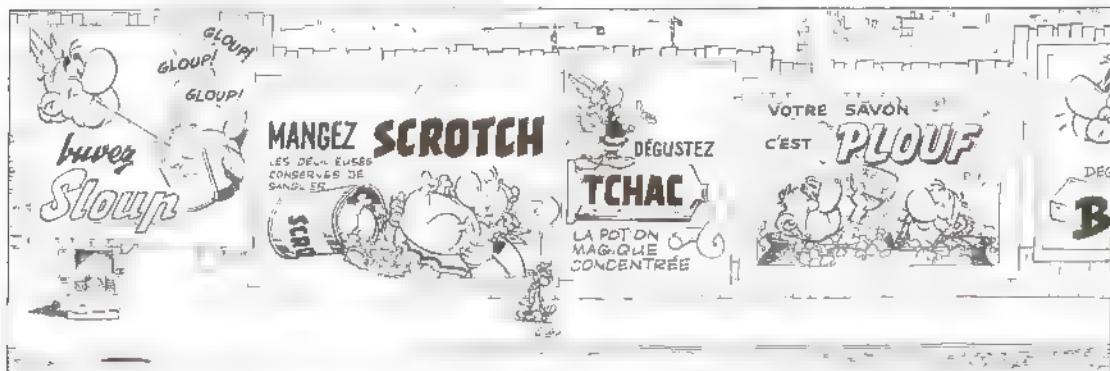
One of Asterix's forays into advertising



This was the sort of recognition Goscinnny had always wanted for comics. Of course, along with adult interest came the adult tendency to take things too seriously. Many people wanted to read deeper, symbolic meanings into Asterix (One German study<sup>12</sup> suggested that the red, white and blue colours of Getafix's clothing are a deliberate inversion of the French flag and therefore represent



a revolutionary tendency] To all these theories the authors would give the same answer: 'We have only one aim: to make ourselves and other people laugh'.<sup>13</sup>



Advertisers loved Asterix. He appeared on labels for chickens, cheese, mustard, tomato sauce, mineral water, desserts and detergents. Outside France he has even been used as an insurance salesman.

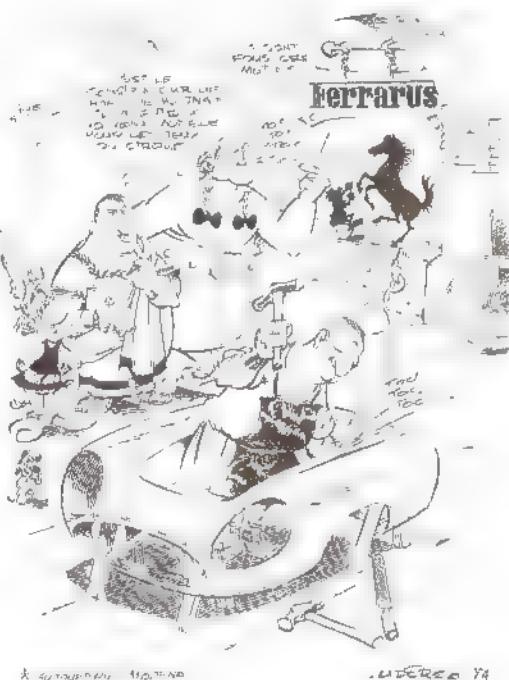
But his creators were more bemused than excited by all this attention. One evening Uderzo saw three adjacent posters in a *Métro* station, each for a different product, and each endorsed by Asterix. After that they decided to impose limits on Asterix-related advertising.

All of a sudden, Goscinny and Uderzo were rich men. While they never let their success go to their heads, they certainly enjoyed indulging in the odd little hobby, like (in Uderzo's case) collecting Ferraris. And Jaguars. And Lambourghinis.

They received many literary honours, and at one awards ceremony reception wild boar was served. This gimmick caught on, and led to a whole series of 'soirées sangliers' (wild boar dinner parties) – an embarrassing situation for Goscinny and Uderzo, who both intensely disliked wild boar.

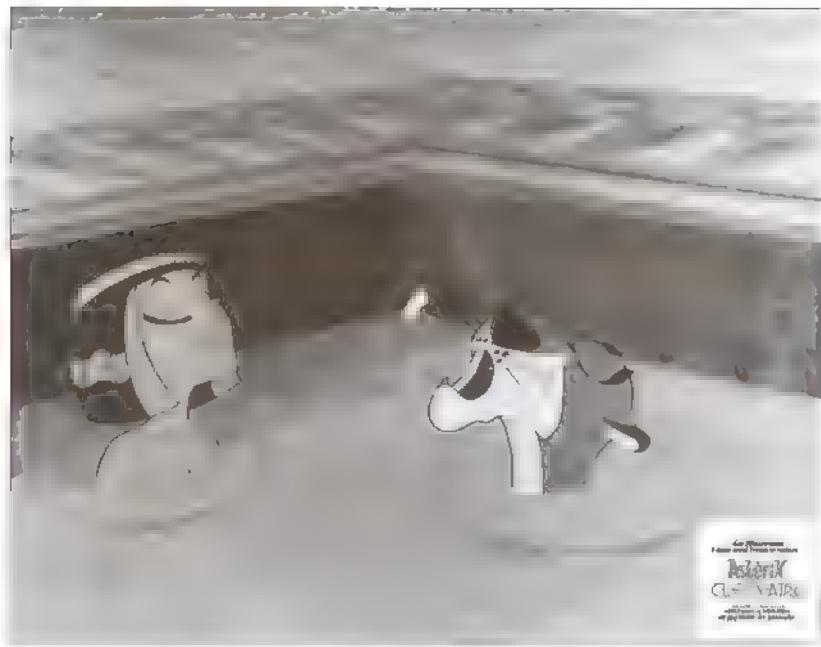
In 1967 the first Asterix film was made. It was an extremely faithful adaptation – virtually panel by panel – of *Asterix the Gaul*. The authors were hardly consulted at all on the animation process, and they felt that the film lost much of the rhythm of the original album. It was nevertheless an enormous success, and was followed a year later by *Asterix and Cleopatra*. This time much more

This cartoon conveys the authors' sense of confusion in the face of over-indulgent product endorsement by Asterix



Uderzo has never taken himself seriously. In this cartoon he mocks his own obsession with Ferraris





original, cinematic material was included (there is one particularly funny scene in which Cleopatra takes a bath with her cheetah) *left*, and this film too was extremely popular.

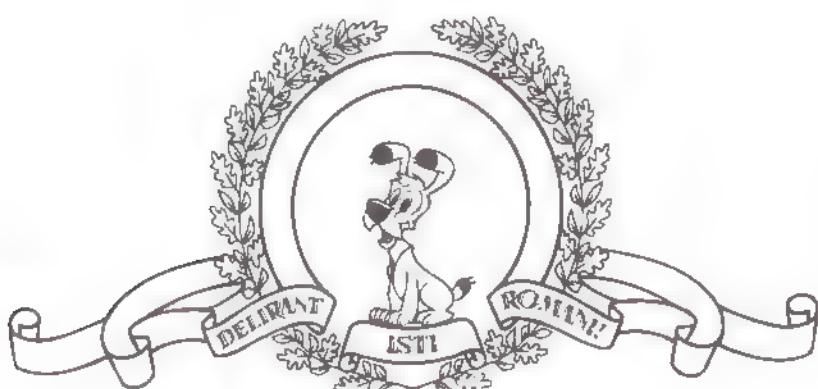
Asterix's empire, not unlike the Roman one he opposed, began to spread across Europe and the rest of the world. In 1969 he arrived in Britain courtesy of Brockhampton Press, the children's book subsidiary of the Hodder group. Goscinny and Uderzo of course took a close interest in all the translations, but

they seem to have had a special soft spot for the English versions. For the early editions of *Asterix in Britain* they even included a special message to English readers, hoping they would not be offended by the jokes (see page 34).

In 1974, after several of his protégés had left *Pilote*, Goscinny gave up editorship of the magazine. It had become, in his view, too specifically aimed at adults, and was no longer the right place for him – or Asterix.

*Walt Disney had been a great influence on both authors, and Studios Idéfix was for them the fulfilment of a lifelong ambition*

The last Asterix adventure to be serialised in *Pilote* was *Asterix in Corsica*. Dargaud however continued to publish the books, and in 1974 he, Uderzo and Goscinny set up their own animation company, Studios Idéfix (Idéfix being the French name for Dogmatix). Walt Disney had been a great influence on both authors, and Studios Idéfix was for them the fulfilment of a lifelong ambition. Studios Idéfix's logo was a direct imitation of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lion – with the slight difference that Dogmatix took the lion's place, and the Latin motto, instead of 'Ars Gratia Artis' ('Art for Art's Sake') read 'Delirant Isti Romani!' ('These Romans Are Crazy').



Asterix film ever made. It was released with the by-now-customary success in 1976.

Work was proceeding on a *Lucky Luke* film when, in November 1977, at the age of fifty-one, Goscinny tragically died from a heart attack.

More than anybody else he had been responsible for making the cartoon a thriving, popular art form in France, and his death was deeply regretted across Europe, where scores of newspapers printed obituaries.

Deprived of Goscinny's energy and enthusiasm, Studios Idéfix closed in 1978. But there was a more dramatic change to come.

Twentythree Asterix books had been published at this stage. The twenty-fourth, *Asterix in Belgium*, had been written but not drawn. Goscinny and Uderzo's relationship with Georges Dargaud had become more and more strained, and the authors had been considering splitting away from their publisher and setting up their own company for future Asterix books.

Following the death of his working partner of the last twenty-six years, Albert Uderzo did not have the heart to complete *Asterix in Belgium*. Dargaud responded by taking him to court and forcing him to draw the book. Uderzo had no choice. He completed the album, but appealed against the court's decision. Ironically, the appeal court found in his favour – but by then the books were already in the shops.

The relationship between Uderzo and Dargaud never healed. Even though the publisher died in 1990 the artist still has few fond memories of him. When asked if he had ever caricatured Dargaud in an Asterix book, Uderzo replied that he had never done so, but if he did, then he would have to depict him as a vampire.

Asterix is famous for his fortitude. After *Belgium* even Albert Uderzo thought the series was over. But Asterix refused to die. Readers wrote to Uderzo, imploring him to continue, and eventually he relented. Bringing in



Uderzo's last drawing of his partner, who had recently bought a poodle for his daughter

*Deprived of Goscinny's energy and enthusiasm, Studios Idéfix closed in 1978. But there was a more dramatic change to come*





Parc Astérix

profitable, Uderzo found other advantages in releasing Asterix from Dargaud's control. He was free to diversify. He continued to write albums (five to date); his studios have produced four more successful animated films; in the mid-1980s he allowed Asterix to lead an AIDS awareness campaign on French TV; and in 1989 the biggest Asterix project to date was unleashed on an insatiable public: *Parc Astérix*, the Asterix Theme Park in Plailly, just outside Paris.

Certainly, with Albert Uderzo now in his sixties (and a proud recipient of France's highest honour, the Légion d'Honneur) he has slowed down to some extent. A book every four years is his current rate, compared with one every six months in his and Goscinny's most prolific period. It may be a long time to wait, but it does make each new Asterix book a particularly special event for the fans. 'The worst problem', he says, 'is finding new ideas.'<sup>14</sup>

Asterix's latest battle however is not taking place in the pages of a book. It is being fought through the turnstiles of two theme parks, and the American invaders Disneyland are if anything a greater threat to Asterix's security than the Romans ever were. Disneyland, Paris, dwarfs *Parc Astérix*, which cost just £69 million to build – less than one fifteenth of the cost of the Disney park. Uderzo is wary of his rivals but is keen for fair play on both sides.

So the original idea behind Asterix has come to three-dimensional life in

another writer was out of the question – nobody could understand the subtleties of Asterix as well as his creators. So, bearing in mind that he had started out in the comics business as a writer/artist, and that he had in any case written several short Asterix adventures as one-offs in *Pilote*, Uderzo made up his mind: Asterix would live again.

First, having completed the split with Dargaud, Uderzo established a new publishing company, Les Editions Albert René. (Made up of his and Goscinny's first names, the title of the company shows Uderzo's constant respect for his late colleague.) Dargaud meanwhile retained his rights in all the books and films published up to that point. Then Uderzo devised, wrote and drew his first solo Asterix book: *Asterix and the Great Divide*. Although he himself in retrospect criticises certain aspects of this book, it was an extremely brave venture, opening him up to the scrutiny of millions of fans. But it worked.

With Les Editions Albert René up and running



Albert Uderzo's back yard. His theme park is a full-size version of Asterix's village, and it is being invaded by a large, highly-organised empire. With their marching parades and strict rules on hair-length, the Disney legions do bear a passing resemblance to the Roman soldiers, at least in attitude. Perhaps *Parc Astérix*'s best defence will be its warm, homely atmosphere.<sup>15</sup> It has a satisfying intimacy about it that Europeans seem to enjoy, and it is the antidote to the American philosophy of 'biggest is best'.

The Gauls have kept the Roman Empire at bay for over two thousand years with their undisciplined but good-natured attitude. It remains to be seen whether the same tactics will work against the fixed smile of Mickey Mouse.

## AN OSCAR-WINNING ASTERIX FAN

It is a little-known fact that, as well as being an award-winning actress, Emma Thompson is also a long-standing Asterix fan. When she was nine years old she sent a letter to Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge. And here it is.

N.B. Miss Thompson must have been obsessed with Asterix at the time. She crossed out the number 6 and replaced it with 14 in her final paragraph, so would appear to have re-read *Asterix the Gaul* eight times between writing and sending the letter

Emma Thompson aged nine yrs.  
I think that the book

*Asterix the Gaul* is very funny indeed. I like the long German and Gaulish names very much, even though they are hard to pronounce. I nearly died laughing when I read

“...” I can't say words when Getafix the Wizard was caught. Are you going to send us any more difficult ones? because I think they are marvellous. My favo... ones are

Vitalstat

Getafix

Caligula Major

Crismus Bonus

Obelix

Cacofony “”

I think the best of those characters, if one I like really well, is these

Asterix I have read it 14 times over.

GETAFIX

CALEGULA MINOR

CRISMUS BOA...

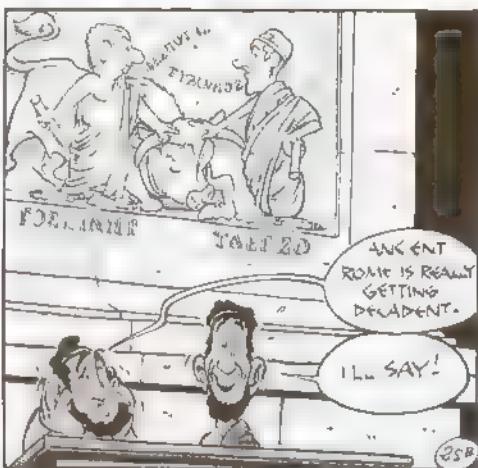
love  
Emma

## BONUS SECTION 1

### SPOT THE AUTHORS



**G**oscinny and Uderzo occasionally smuggled themselves into Asterix's adventures in Hitchcockian cameo roles. (After all, it would not be fair to caricature other people if they were not able to laugh at themselves too.)



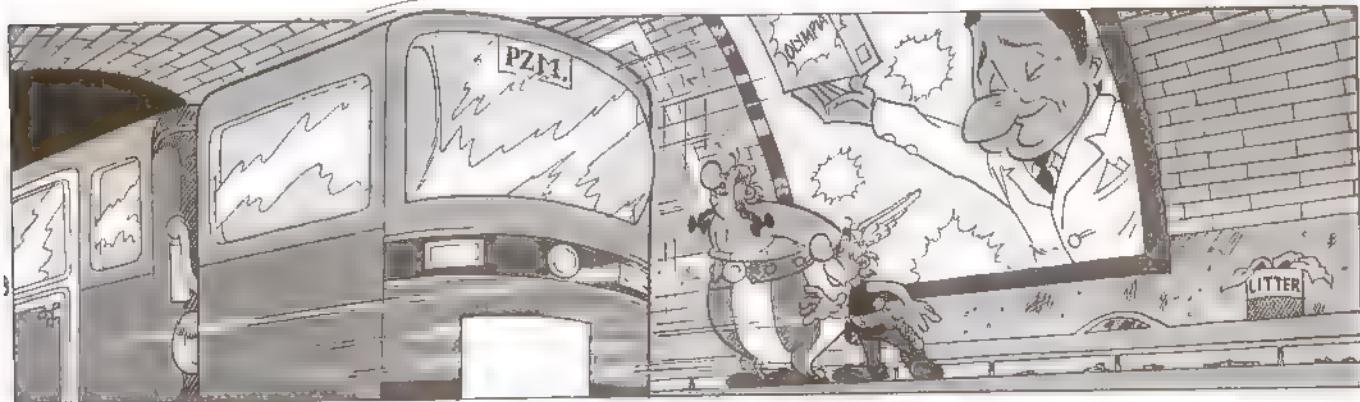
In *Asterix at the Olympic Games* the authors appear carved as a bas-relief at the entrance to the Olympic Village. Goscinny is calling Uderzo a 'despot' while Uderzo responds with 'tyrant'. Between them they are subduing a bull, which suggests that, for them, creating an Asterix adventure is a Herculean task. (One of Hercules' twelve tasks was to capture the Cretan wild bull.)



They pop up briefly in the very next adventure, *Asterix and the Cauldron*, as a couple of Roman aristocrats at the theatre. Uderzo is to the left of the prefect, and Goscinny is two to the right of him. As in real life, Goscinny is having no trouble making those around him laugh.



By the time of their next appearance, in *Obelix and Co.*, the authors' fortunes have suffered a downturn. As a pair of slovenly, unshaven legionaries, they can be glimpsed grudgingly stretchering an inebriated comrade out of the Roman camp. This character is Goscinny and Uderzo's real-life friend and collaborator, Pierre Tchernia



This was to be Uderzo's last cameo role in the Asterix books (to date), but Goscinny appeared twice more. He features on an underground poster in *The Twelve Tasks of Asterix* (above), and as a fully-fledged character, Saul Ben Ephishul, in *Asterix and the Black Gold* (below).



Albert Uderzo dedicated *Black Gold* to the memory of his partner, so it was fitting that Goscinny should play a significant role in the story.

## CHAPTER TWO

# IF ANYONE SHOULD EVER BE FOOL ENOUGH TO WRITE THE STORY OF OUR VILLAGE . . .



## ASTERIX'S DEVELOPMENT

THINK back through some of the Asterix books you have read. That familiar pattern of Asterix, Obelix and Dogmatix setting off on some Roman-bashing campaign that you know will end on page 48 with a banquet beneath the stars . . .

But is Dogmatix always there?

By no means. In fact he was not even invented until the fifth Asterix book, *Asterix and the Banquet*. This album appeared in France in 1965, but was not translated into English until 1979. (The reason? It is so full of French provincial jokes and accents that the publishers felt it might be incomprehensible to English-speaking fans.) The result of the disorder was that readers of English were introduced to Dogmatix as a new character when they were already fully familiar with him as an old favourite.

In the same way *Asterix and the Golden Sickle* (first published in France in 1962) was not translated until 1975. In it Getafix tries to dissuade Asterix from going to Lutetia, saying, 'It's too far! Too dangerous!' Yet in *Laurel Wreath* (translated before *Golden Sickle* but written after it) Lutetia is shown as accessible enough for regular shopping trips.

It is time for English-speaking Asterix fans to put their books in order.

The following chronological breakdown of the entire series will help to show how Asterix's world, the characters who fill it, and even the style in which they are drawn, have developed over the years. Albert Uderzo has added his own comments on many of the books.



## Phase One: 1959-1964, "The Rough-Hewn Menhir"

THE first four books in the series are characterised by a rough, big-boned artistic style (see right); broad, black outlines and large areas with a single colour washed across. The backgrounds too are far less detailed than in later books. But this style was quite appropriate for Asterix in those days: he was establishing himself as the unsophisticated champion of innocence.



### BOOK 1

## Asterix The Gaul

French title: *Astérix Le Gaulois*

First published: 1961. Translated: 1969

**PLOT** When Getafix is kidnapped by the Romans Asterix penetrates their camp to rescue him, with hair-raising results . . .

**COMMENTS** The first book establishes the main characters by allowing us to see them through the eyes of a Roman spy. But those characters were to change. Some of them develop radically even in the space of this one book. At the start, for instance, Obelix wears an axe, and his menhir is an oddly uneven shape.

Caesar goes through an even more dramatic metamorphosis between beginning and end.

**Uderzo says:** *'These characters had to be created very quickly because of the tight deadline for the launch of Pilote . . . In the case of Obelix, I decided that his axe was too warlike. It made him look too violent.'*



Page 35: The only page of Asterix not drawn by Uderzo. The original plate

for this page was lost, and it was completely redrawn by his brother Marcel in about 1970. English-language editions still use the original, if rather blurred version (see picture on page 68).

## BOOK 2

# Asterix and the Golden Sickle

French title: *La Serpe d'Or* ('The Golden Sickle')

First published: 1962. Translated: 1975

**PLOT** Getafix has broken his golden sickle, so Asterix and Obelix visit Lutetia to buy a new one. Unfortunately, the sickle-smith (a cousin of Obelix's) has mysteriously gone missing . . .

**COMMENTS** Goscinny and Uderzo had made a conscious decision that any violence in Asterix would be of the harmless, 'biff-bang' variety. In the first book they had underlined this by including a torturer whose most horrific instrument was a feather. Here again, after warnings of ferocious bandits in the woods, we meet one who is the epitome of politeness (page 31).

*Golden Sickle* also introduces one of Goscinny and Uderzo's favourite Asterix techniques, the running gag. Asterix and Obelix are repeatedly arrested by the same Roman patrol. The Gaulish cockerel (ancestor of the French national symbol) also makes his first appearance (page 22).

## BOOK 3

# Asterix and the Goths

French title: *Astérix chez les Goths*

First published: 1963. Translated: 1974

**PLOT** Again Getafix is kidnapped, this time by a raiding band of Goths. Asterix and Obelix follow them into Germania and, in the process of rescuing their druid, set off a whole series of tribal wars.

**COMMENTS** This book follows naturally from the last. In *Golden Sickle*



Getafix had announced that the annual druids' conference in the Forest of the Carnutes was fast approaching; here he actually attends it. The Forest of the Carnutes was a real place in the neighbourhood of Dreux, Eure-et-Loire. It is mentioned in Caesar's *Gallic Wars* Book VI: 'These druids at a certain time of the year meet within the borders of the Carnutes, whose territory is reckoned as the centre of all Gaul, and sit in conclave in a consecrated spot.' Goscinny had read Caesar, and this passage may well have been the inspiration for the druids' competition.

Goscinny and Uderzo were careful not to draw any strong comparison between the Goths and the Germans of the Second World War. If anything, Uderzo's Gothic helmets bear more similarity to those worn during World War One.

**Uderzo says:** 'I decided to make the reference a bit more distant. A World War Two helmet would have been too close. In France, it's an image people try to forget — we don't like to be reminded of our defeats.'

## BOOK 4

# Asterix the Gladiator

French title: *Astérix Gladiateur*

First published: 1964. Translated: 1969

**PLOT** The Romans capture Cacofonix as a gift for Caesar, who plans to throw him to the lions. To get into the Circus Maximus and rescue their bard, Asterix and Obelix have to become gladiators . . .

**COMMENTS** The long gladiator-training sequence in this book is a parody of Stanley Kubrick's film *Spartacus*. Once again, Goscinny and Uderzo tackle a potentially horrific subject (gladiatorial contests), and completely remove its sting by making their gladiators play parlour games instead. Hollywood made a number of Roman epics in the early sixties, and Asterix took advantage of them more than once: *Ben Hur* can be seen in the chariot race in this book, and the Elizabeth Taylor blockbuster *Cleopatra* is behind several scenes in *Asterix and Cleopatra*.



The villainous *lanista* (gladiator trainer) Caius Fatuous was based on a real person.

**Uderzo says:** ‘*This was a friend, a journalist, now sadly deceased, called Georges Fronval.*’

*The authors went on to include many friends in Asterix’s adventures, as affectionate jokes.*

## Phase Two: 1965-1967, “The Burnished Cauldron”



**T**HIS short period could be seen as the Golden Age of Asterix – not because it contains the best of his adventures, but because the rough texture of Uderzo’s earlier illustrations is gradually replaced by a smooth, rich, polished quality (see left). The figures are neat, compact and rounded, which reflects the authors’ growing self-confidence with their cast of characters.

### BOOK 5

## Asterix and the Banquet

French title: *Le Tour de Gaul*

(a joke about the annual *Tour de France* bicycle race)

First published: 1965. Translated: 1979

**PLOT** The Romans build a barricade around the Village. So Asterix and Obelix demonstrate their resistance by going on a journey around the entire country, collecting local specialities on the way . . .

**COMMENTS** This adventure is an affectionate parody of French regional types, and as such it is difficult for foreign readers to appreciate the full humour of it. There is even a parody of Marcel Pagnol’s three films from the 1920s and 30s about provincial French life, *Marius*, *Fanny* and *César* (on page



31] – and this explains why the landlord on this page is called ‘Caesar’. The characters at the inn re-enact games of cards and *boules* from the films, and Pagnol (who died in 1974) responded, ‘Now I know my work will be immortal, because it has appeared in Asterix.’<sup>18</sup>

Bearing in mind Albert Uderzo’s year of semi-anonymity in Brittany during the war, it is tempting to see the German occupation of France as the impulse behind Asterix’s defiant statement on page 8: ‘Gaul is our country, O Roman, and we’ll go where we like in it!’ But Uderzo insists that the *Tour de France* cycle race is the only inspiration for this book.

## BOOK 6

# Asterix and Cleopatra

French title: *Astérix chez Cléopâtre*

First published: 1965. Translated: 1969

**PLOT** Getafix, Obelix, Dogmatix and Asterix visit Egypt to help an architect build a palace for Caesar. There they are entranced by the Sphinx, the pyramids and Cleopatra’s nose . . .

**COMMENTS** This is the fifth adventure in a row that takes Asterix away from home. It was ideal for serialisation in *Pilote*, as each two-page spread is virtually a self-contained mini-adventure in its own right.

You can see the influence of the film *Cleopatra* most clearly in the throne on page 6 and the mobile Sphinx on page 27.

Cleopatra herself bears no resemblance to Elizabeth Taylor, although in keeping with the style of Hollywood’s biblical epics she does seem to owe more to the 1960s than to ancient Egypt for her appearance (see page 67).

Two interesting oddities. In the English translation, the dice of page 6 have been redrawn to show the numbers 6,6,6. In the original, they showed 4,2,1, which is a French dice game. And on page 33 the newspaper cartoon *Pnuts* is another redraw: the original version was based on the French cartoon *Juliette de mon Coeur* (see page 69).



# Asterix and the Big Fight

French title: *Le Combat des Chefs* (Battle of the Chieftains)

First published: 1966. Translated: 1971

**PLOT** The Romans persuade a Gaulish chief to challenge Vitalstatistix to single combat. This poses no threat until Getafix is hit by a flying menhir and forgets how to make the magic potion . . .

**COMMENTS** It was all getting just a bit too easy. If you have a magic potion, then you will always win. So Goscinny and Uderzo decided to remove the magic potion.

**Uderzo says:** 'Yes, the *magic potion* is very useful for authors . . . especially when they've run out of ideas.'

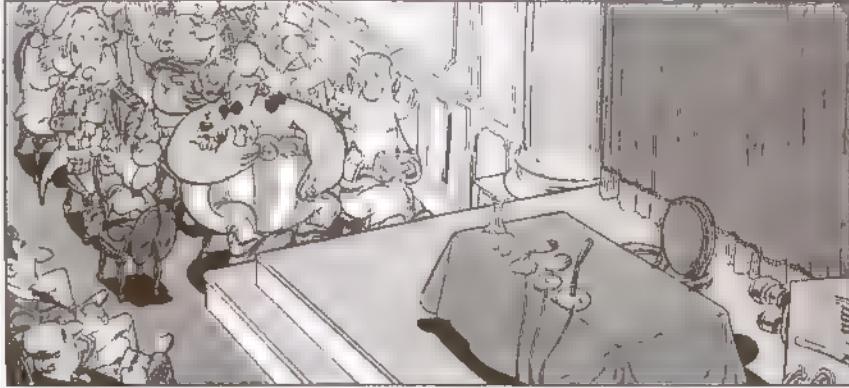
This book makes Chief Vitalstatistix a star for the first time, and as befits a true chief, his role was heralded by a press conference in the pages of *Pilote* (see picture opposite).

*Big Fight* also includes a very funny satire on psychiatry (pages 30-31) in which the druid Psychoanalytix 'cures' people by making their problems more acceptable to society. Interestingly, after contact with Asterix's village, the druid seems positively to encourage an individual rather than a conformist attitude (page 47).

An important moment for Asterix comes in page 35 panel 8. All magic gone, he stands up for pure common sense. The authors realised that this was his true strength and his true appeal, and they would elaborate on this theme in the very next book.



# CONFÉRENCE *de* PRESSE



# Asterix in Britain

French title: *Astérix chez les Bretons*

First published: 1966. Translated: 1970

**PLOT** The Romans have invaded Britain, but one village still holds out against them. At British cousin Anticlimax's request, Asterix and Obelix set off to help with a barrel full of magic potion . . .

**COMMENTS** In *Big Fight* Vitalstatistix did not need magic potion to defeat Cassius Ceramix -- he just needed the right attitude. The same is true of Mykingdomforanos's village in this book. Having lost the magic potion, Asterix merely introduces the Britons to tea. Their belief in themselves allows them to win.

There is a moral here for those who wish to see it, about true strength lying within oneself. On the other hand it could be taken simply as a funny idea: the British are so mad about tea that to them it really *is* magic potion.

When *Asterix in Britain* was first translated, the authors included a special message to English readers, which is no longer published. The message read:

*As usual, we caricature what we are fond of, and we are fond of the British, in spite of their strange way of putting Nelson on top of their columns instead of Napoleon.*

*However, when it comes to presenting this skit on the British to the British, we feel we owe them a word or two of explanation.*

*Our little strip cartoon stories do not make fun of the real thing, but the ideas of the real thing that people get into their heads, i.e., clichés.*

*We Gauls imagine the British talking in a very refined way, drinking tea at five o'clock and warm beer at the peculiar hours of opening time. The British eat their food boiled, with mint sauce; they are brave, phlegmatic, and always keep a stiff upper lip. Suppose we were British, caricaturing the Gauls, we would say they all wore berets, ate frogs and snails and drank red wine for breakfast. We might add that they all have hopelessly relaxed upper lips, and that phlegm is not their outstanding characteristic.*

*And, most of all, we should hope that the Gauls would have as good a sense of humour as the British.*

ASTERIX, UDERZO and GOSCINNY



They were not just being polite. Asterix has always battled against 'the ideas of the real thing that people get into their heads' – notions that people take for granted and without question. In fact he is accompanied by a permanent reminder of this in the shape of Dogmatix, who is known in France as Idéfix – 'Fixed Idea'. [In any case, people love being made fun of. *Asterix in Britain* is the most popular Asterix book with British readers.]

## BOOK 9

# Asterix and the Normans

French title: *Astérix et les Normands*

First published: 1966. Translated: 1978

**PLOT** A group of Vikings comes to Gaul trying to learn what fear is. Their visit coincides with that of a real expert on the subject: Vitalstatistix's trendy nephew from Lutetia, Justforkix . . .

**COMMENTS** From the Romans' point of view this book is very important. It is the first adventure in which they do not play the villains. Instead they are an ineffective peace-keeping force, more to be pitied than hated. And from this point on, we only ever meet *individual* Romans who are truly evil. The mass are just misguided innocents.

Justforkix is one of the best-realised 'guest stars' ever to appear in an Asterix book. In fact he steals the limelight from Asterix and Obelix. His reward came many years later when he was made the hero of the *Asterix Game Book* series.



# Asterix the Legionary

French title: *Astérix Légionnaire*

First published: 1967. Translated: 1970

**PLOT** Asterix and Obelix enlist in the Roman army to rescue Tragicomix, the forcibly conscripted fiancé of the beautiful Panacea . . .

**COMMENTS** This, the book about war, is really about love. Goscinny and Uderzo did not want to glorify war, so they made the starting and finishing points of this story pure romance: first with Obelix being smitten by Panacea, and finally with Asterix falling for her himself.

**Uderzo says:** ‘*People often ask me if Panacea is based on my wife. She’s very flattered by the comparison . . . and actually, it’s true.*’

Again, this book builds naturally on the last. In *Normans* the Romans were shown not as villains but as nervous innocents. Here much of the comedy comes from the fact that they are all simply victims of their own bureaucracy. Nefarius Purpus

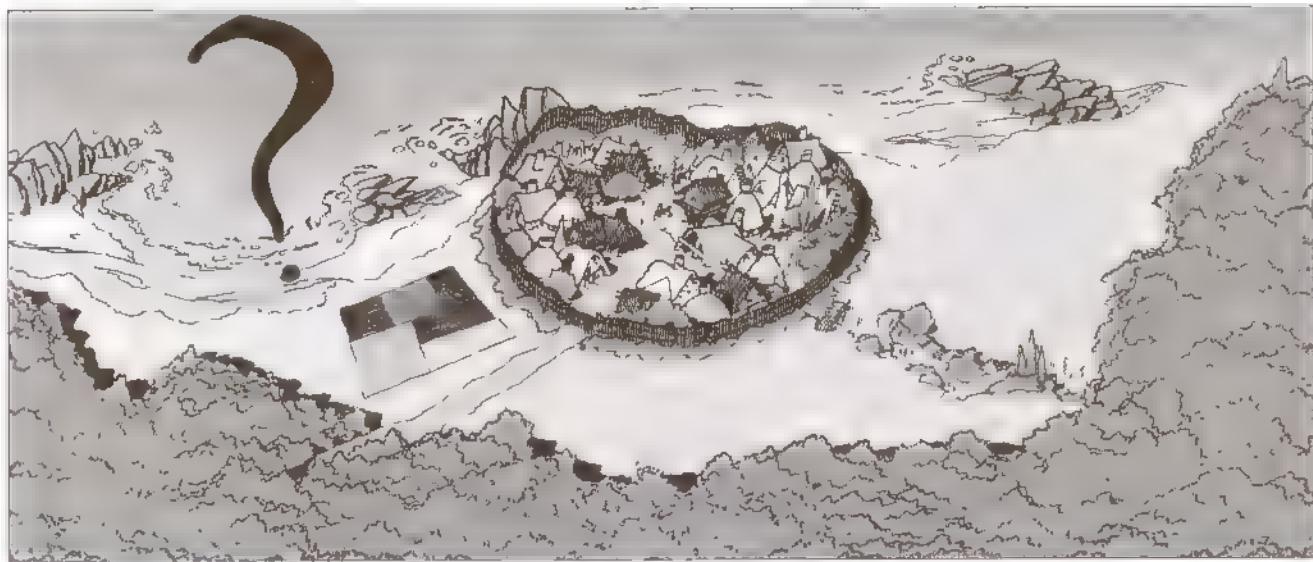
and Dubius Status desperately try to stick to the rules, while Asterix and Obelix achieve much more by breaking them.

The men of Asterix’s squadron are a source of endless character comedy in this adventure. Each nationality is gently mocked, so we are treated to a sort of concentrated version of *Asterix in Britain, Belgium, Greece, Egypt and Germany*. One detail not to miss is on page 21: the Belgian legionary Gastronomix has the same hairstyle as that other Belgian hero, Tintin.

A historical note: Asterix’s adventures at this time kept chronological pace with Caesar’s campaigns. After victory at Thapsus (shown in this book) the emperor went on to battle at Munda, which is referred to in a following book *Asterix in Spain*.



# THE VILLAGE WITH NO NAME



**A**sterix's Village has always been just that: Asterix's Village.

Usually it is referred to as 'the little village we know so well'. But it has never been given a name.

Why not?

A number of villages in Northern France vie with each other in claiming to be the inspiration for the Gaulish Village. But all we can be sure of is that it is located somewhere in Brittany.

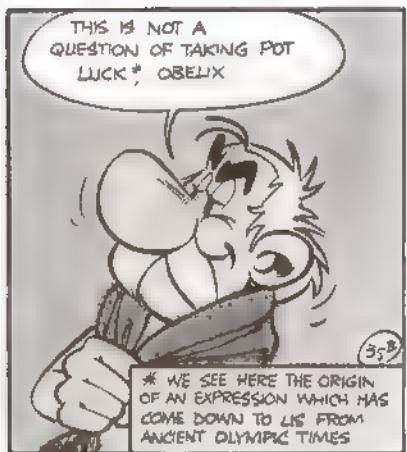
Could it be that Asterix's Village is a sort of 'Every-village'? A microcosm of our own society? Or perhaps a symbol of defiance, resistance, love of liberty, that can exist anywhere and so should not be pinned down by a name?

It could be. But it isn't.

According to Albert Uderzo, 'There are two things that have no names: the Village and the wife of Geriatrix. This is simply because Goscinny never thought it necessary to give them names. Besides, according to history Gaulish villages never had names in the first place.'

The anonymity of the Village may however be at risk. In April 1993 *The Independent* featured a front-page story under the headline 'Asterix's home village is uncovered in France'. Apparently an Anglo-French archaeological expedition had unearthed the remains of an Iron Age village that was almost identical to Asterix's home. So were Goscinny and Uderzo acting under the influence of some sixth sense? Or could the coincidence be better explained by the precise date of *The Independent's* story – April 1?

## Phase Three: 1968-1971, "The Teeming Village"



FROM 1968 Uderzo decided to devote himself entirely to Asterix, and abandoned all other work. Consequently he had more time to spend on details, and this is clear in the next few albums. While maintaining the compact, precise style of the previous books, he began to make expressions more lifelike. The result is that Asterix is capable of showing more subtle changes in mood (see left), and we see other village characters begin to emerge too (especially in *Olympic Games*), their development keeping pace with the evolving art style.

### BOOK 11

## Asterix and the Chieftain's Shield

French title: *Le Bouclier Arverne* (The Arvernian Shield)

First published: 1968. Translated: 1977

**PLOT** While escorting Vitalstatistix to a health spa, Asterix and Obelix are caught up in a chase with the Romans to find Vercingetorix's shield, which disappeared after the battle of Alésia . . .

**COMMENTS** Like *Banquet* this book depends heavily on regional accents for its comedy, although there are many other ingredients to keep foreign readers happy. The running gag of Vitalstatistix's volatile liver is great slapstick, and the scene in Circumbendibus' factory is a brilliant parody of the modern office.

The Chieftain's Shield itself is seen by Caesar as the embodiment of the Gauls' free spirit, and the fact that he fails to get his hands (or rather his feet) on it suggests that their hearts have never submitted even if their armies have.

*Chieftain's Shield* is perhaps not the most successful Asterix adventure. The main story takes a while to gather pace (it is not until page 27 that Asterix states his objective out loud) and the artwork seems to lack some of the customary richness. On page 8 Fulliautomatix looks rather flat.

**Uderzo comments:** 'I wasn't up to my usual standard that day . . . I think I had a bit of indigestion.'



# Asterix at the Olympic Games

French title: *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques*

First published: 1968. Translated: 1972

**PLOT** The entire (male) population of the Village sets off for the Olympic Games in Athens, only to discover that magic potion is a banned substance . . .

**COMMENTS** The inspiration for this book was the Tokyo Olympics of the same year, and the translation was cleverly timed to coincide with the Munich Olympics of 1972. The theme of artificially enhancing athletes' performances is of course just as relevant today, if not more so. But particularly clever is the authors' skill in having the potion banned *without* making it seem like some evil drug.

By contrast with *Chieftain's Shield*, many of the jokes in *Olympic Games* are pan-European. But the book's main appeal is its 'group outing' atmosphere. The other villagers had never before accompanied Asterix on an adventure, and their presence adds a great deal to the fun. In fact, this adventure could be seen as a deliberate move to expand Asterix's world and explore its minor figures. (Geriatrictix and Fulliautomatix are especially prominent.)

One more epic film reference: the dance on page 27 is a parody of a scene in *Zorba The Greek*.

# Asterix and the Cauldron

French title: *Astérix et le Chaudron*

First published: 1969. Translated: 1976

**PLOT** Asterix is left in charge of a visiting chief's cauldron full of sestertii. The money is stolen, and to save his honour Asterix has to refill the cauldron . . .

**COMMENTS** One of the simplest plots in the whole series makes for one of Asterix's fastest-moving adventures. His sole aim is to fill the cauldron, and this becomes the starting point for a series of mini-adventures connected by one theme: the need to make money.



Money is the one thing that totally confuses Asterix. He has no head for business, but eventually wins through his understanding of human nature. Like *Obelix and Co.*, which was to come later, this book takes the form of an extended criticism of the evils of lucre, a subject to which modern readers can relate all too easily.

## BOOK 14

# Asterix in Spain

French title: *Astérix en Hispanie* (Asterix in Hispania)

First published: 1969. Translated: 1971

**PLOT** The Romans capture a young boy, Pepe, from a Spanish village they are besieging. He is sent to Gaul for safekeeping, but Asterix and Obelix rescue him and set off to take him home . . .

**COMMENTS** As well as being a vehicle for laughing at Spanish customs, this adventure is a good illustration of a vital Asterix quality: innocence. Pepe is a complete innocent, but his simple way of dealing with problems (holding his breath or biting) is extremely effective. This is why he gets on so well with the Gauls – they have exactly the same attitude. In fact Obelix even copies Pepe's technique at one point, when he holds his breath on page 16.

Page 18 contains the first, historic Village fish fight. The odd thing about these fish fights is that they show how *united* the Gauls are, rather than how *divided*. They are a mode of relaxation. Nowadays we might go to the pub.

Page 5: one of the jokes that has confused non-French readers for years can now be cleared up: why does Caesar pull his legionaries' ears? There are two answers. One, when matadors perform particularly well they are given the ears of the bull. Two:

**Uderzo says:** 'It's a visual gag about Napoleon. According to the history books, he liked touching his soldiers' ears.'



# Asterix and the Roman Agent

French title: *La Zizanie*

(A type of invasive weed. The archaic idiom 'semer la zizanie' meant 'to sow discord'. This explains the agent's name in the English version: Convolvulus – more commonly known as bindweed)

First published: 1970. Translated: 1972

**PLOT** Caesar gets the idea of defeating the Gauls by destroying their solidarity. So he sends to the Village a special agent with a unique ability to cause arguments wherever he goes . . .

**COMMENTS** This is the only adventure that includes a 'symbolic' character. Convolvulus, the Roman Agent, is the physical embodiment of social disruption. Injecting him into the Gaulish Village has the effect of a moral tale about the danger of gossip and deceit. He also shows us just how complex the Village society has become, since every character is affected differently by him.

But there is also a suggestion that Convolvulus is not all bad: on page 44 we are told 'we need not be unduly worried about him'. The suggestion is that society needs a certain amount of petty bickering to keep itself going, and this is the point of Getafix's conclusion: 'You have to like them. They're only human.'

A puzzling point on page 18: where does the idea that Vitalstatistix has been nominated a senator come from?

**Uderzo says:** 'At that time there were several senators of Gaulish extraction. The Romans realised that the best way to get peace in the provinces was to give a voice to Gaulish political leaders.'



# Asterix in Switzerland

French title: *Astérix chez les Helvètes* (Asterix and the Helvetians)

First published: 1970. Translated: 1973

**PLOT** Getafix has an unusual patient: a Roman tax inspector. The only thing that can save his life is a rare flower, and Asterix and Obelix set off to Switzerland to find it . . .

**COMMENTS** Once again the progression from book to book is clear: in *Roman Agent* the idea of Vitalstatistix constantly falling off his shield was introduced; at the start of *Switzerland* the shield-bearers are summarily sacked.

One of the themes of this adventure is the Romans' passion for begrimed themselves at over-indulgent orgies (the obsession extends even to

packed orgies for journeys). In itself this is an excellent, and very funny, subject to use, but here it also neatly sets off the Swiss mania for cleanliness. *Switzerland* contains another 'redraw' from the French original. Page 20: the Michelin man was put into the English translation to replace a small Gallic warrior, renowned in France as the mascot of Antar petrol (see left).

But the big controversy in this book focuses on page 20, panel 3. What is the black splodge that suddenly appears on Curius Odus' tunic? Could it be that Uderzo spilled

some ink here, and then drew the picture round it? I put this question to Albert Uderzo. At first his response was, 'No, it's a stain, a deliberate stain . . . perhaps it came from some spilled cheese.' When I explained my theory however he replied, 'Well, if you prefer that version you can put it in the book.' Is that an admission?



Which is the most popular Asterix book in English? How high does your particular favourite rank? And how many have been sold altogether? Obviously the figures are changing all the time, but up to the end of 1994 this was the situation:

1st:	<b>Asterix in Britain</b> (896,334)
2nd:	<b>Asterix the Gladiator</b> (715,716)
3rd:	<b>Asterix at the Olympic Games</b> (708,876)
4th:	<b>Asterix and the Big Fight</b> (690,602)
5th:	<b>Asterix and the Roman Agent</b> (644,057)
6th:	<b>Asterix in Switzerland</b> (637,162)
7th:	<b>Asterix the Gaul</b> (636,776)
8th:	<b>Asterix and Cleopatra</b> (626,592)
9th:	<b>The Mansions of the Gods</b> (577,012)
10th:	<b>Asterix and the Goths</b> (569,225)
11th:	<b>Asterix the Legionary</b> (567,525)
12th:	<b>Asterix in Spain</b> (548,342)
13th:	<b>Asterix and the Soothsayer</b> (517,209)
14th:	<b>Asterix and the Golden Sickle</b> (516,947)
15th:	<b>Asterix and the Laurel Wreath</b> (502,216)



Obviously the more recent books have sold fewer copies than those that have been available for many years. We can expect their positions to improve gradually. But it is interesting that *Banquet*, *Belgium* and *Corsica* come quite a way down the list, as they are the three books that would mean much more to the French than any other nationality.

*Olympic Games* (3rd) scores higher than other books translated in the same period, perhaps because its topicality comes round every four years.

It is a pity that *Cauldron* comes in 21st position. It is a first-rate adventure and well worth reading. *Britain* is however a clear winner, with an advantage of almost 200,000 copies over the second-placed *Gladiator*.

# THE ASTERIX BOOK LEAGUE TABLE

16th:	<b>Asterix and the Great Crossing</b> (441,888)
17th:	<b>Asterix and the Chieftain's Shield</b> (441,343)
18th:	<b>Asterix and the Normans</b> (424,577)
19th:	<b>Obelix and Co.</b> (423,494)
20th:	<b>Asterix and Caesar's Gift</b> (386,738)
21st:	<b>Asterix and the Cauldron</b> (382,207)
22nd:	<b>Asterix and the Banquet</b> (381,689)
23rd:	<b>Asterix and Son</b> (360,923)
24th:	<b>Asterix and the Black Gold</b> (360,523)
25th:	<b>Asterix and the Great Divide</b> (353,963)
26th:	<b>Asterix in Belgium</b> (353,201)
27th:	<b>Asterix in Corsica</b> (338,706)
28th:	<b>Asterix and the Magic Carpet</b> (188,491)
29th:	<b>Asterix and the Secret Weapon</b> (112,551)

Add these figures to those of film books, game books, the *Asterix Poster Book*, *How Obelix Fell into the Magic Potion when he was a Little Boy*, and various multi-book packaged editions, and the total sales of Asterix in English come to well over sixteen million.

That may sound a lot, but English only comes fourth on the list of top-selling Asterix languages. It is just pipped by the Netherlands, with eighteen million copies sold in Dutch. But way out in front come the German and French editions, which have sold a staggering seventy-one million and seventy-eight million respectively.

# The Mansions of the Gods

French title: *Le Domaine des Dieux* (The Domain of the Gods)

First published: 1971. Translated: 1973

**PLOT** Another of Caesar's brilliant ideas: to build a modern block of flats next to the Gaulish Village in the hope that the Gauls will be overtaken by Roman culture. It nearly works . . .

**COMMENTS** Once again the Gaulish Villagers battle against modernisation, in one of their most original adventures.

The book divides into three phases: the building of the flats, the slaves' revolt, and the invasion of the tenants. Rather than peppering the story with anachronistic jokes as usual, this entire adventure is one extended anachronism about housing developments. But it is knitted so carefully into Asterix's world that at no stage does it feel out of place.

The illustration on pages 28 and 29 is a *tour de force*. As well as being beautifully drawn, it is a perfect parody of the sort of brochure that promotes half-built 'luxury apartments' or package-holiday resorts. (To make it fall across a spread, however, it was necessary to drop the 'A Few Of The Gauls' page for the first time, which means *Mansions* is the only Asterix book with 47 pages.)

## Phase Four: 1972-1979, "Characteristix and Sophistix"



FROM 1968 to 1971 Albert Uderzo's brother Marcel had been assisting him with the inking process, but with book number 18 (*Laurel Wreath*) Uderzo went back to both pencilling and inking himself. This is obvious from a development in the graphic style. The pictures become more sketch-like and less boldly defined (see left); the emphasis is firmly on expression; and the result is that the characters begin to have the feel of real people. Hand in hand with this, the books of the seventies take their themes more and more from real life: politics, money, business, superstition and even, in the very next book, alcoholism.



## BOOK 18

# Asterix and the Laurel Wreath

French title: *Les Lauriers de César* (Caesar's Laurels)

First published: 1972. Translated: 1974

**PLOT** While drunk, Vitalstatistix promises his brother-in-law a stew flavoured with Caesar's laurel wreath. Much to Asterix's annoyance, he and Obelix are sent to Rome to fetch it . . .

**COMMENTS** Not satisfied with having fully fleshed out Asterix's circle of friends, Goscinny and Uderzo now start to expand the cast of characters beyond the Village, and we meet Impedimenta's unbearably successful brother Homeopathix. Homeopathix may not appear again in the series, but his presence is felt in *Soothsayer* (page 14) when Impedimenta believes that Vitalstatistix will set up in business with him, and also in *Caesar's Gift* (page 15) when Vitalstatistix sympathises with Orthopaedix's reluctance to move to Lutetia.

The accessibility of Lutetia is mirrored by the accessibility of Rome. Back in *Gladiator*, Asterix's journey to Rome formed a major part of the story. But by this stage he is such a seasoned traveller that the trip can be completely skipped. This shorthand style allows the authors to spend more time on the story, and less on the logistics.

Because of its tight construction, *Laurel Wreath* has a more complex story than usual, a fact reflected in the art. The depiction of Caesar's palace is extremely detailed (page 12), and on page 47 Uderzo even uses a form of *pointillism* to convey the pre-dawn twilight.

## BOOK 19

# Asterix and the Soothsayer

French title: *Le Devin* (The Soothsayer)

First published: 1972. Translated: 1975

**PLOT** A charlatan fortune-teller arrives in the Village and takes advantage of both the Gauls' and the Romans' gullibility. It seems only Asterix can see through him . . .



*The Wandering Jew* by Gustave Doré



**COMMENTS** By the time we reach number 19, we feel we know what to expect from an Asterix book. But *Soothsayer* is full of refreshing ideas. The very first picture is an unusual way of seeing the Village: in the middle of a thunderstorm. And page 9 is another surprise: it takes place entirely inside a parenthesis. Experiments like this show that the authors were not becoming complacent, but were continuing to stretch the boundaries of their creation.

The theme here is superstition, and the villain of the piece is Prolix the Soothsayer. But Goscinny and Uderzo do not pass judgement: even Prolix has

a limited appeal (on page 35 for example, he wearily wishes everyone would stop grabbing him by the front of his tunic). Some critics have seen a resemblance between Prolix and the nineteenth-century artist Doré's depiction of 'The Wandering Jew' (a legendary figure condemned to roam the world until the Second Coming of Christ). Judge for yourself from the picture [*left*], but this is a possible influence for his scapegoat-like role in the story.<sup>17</sup>

As in *Roman Agent*, the way the Gauls finally win is by turning the threat back upon itself (in this case that means giving the Soothsayer a surprise). This ability to adapt to every threat is another of the Gauls' natural defences, and it contrasts with the rigidity of the Roman method.

A minor but interesting point: the picture on page 9, panel 7 depicts Uderzo's own home in the country.

**Uderzo says:** '*When people visit me they always say I live in a Gaulish hut – but actually there are many thatched cottages in the area.*'

The Uderzo country residence



## BOOK 20

# Asterix in Corsica

French title: *Astérix en Corse*

First published: 1973. Translated: 1979.

**PLOT** The Gauls free a Corsican warrior held by the Romans, then accompany him back to his homeland . . .

**COMMENTS** *Corsica* has an unusual opening. First, the conventional map page is replaced by one of Corsica. Second, the French edition contains a message for Corsican readers similar to the one originally used in *Britain*. And third, the story begins with the return of many guest characters from previous adventures. (This was the last Asterix book to be serialised in *Pilote*, so perhaps they were brought back as a farewell gesture.)

There is also some breathtaking artwork in this book – Albert Uderzo is a great lover of the Corsican countryside, and visited the island before starting work on this book. 'It was so beautiful, with all the colours of the leaves, reds and yellows. I tried to recreate it in my pictures, but there wasn't time to do it justice.'

Unfortunately the story fizzles out after a while. This is because nothing in the adventure poses any threat or challenge to the Gauls themselves. The reason they give for accompanying Boneywasawarriorwayayix back to Corsica is simply to find out 'what methods you Corsicans use, and what your country's like' – perhaps a little aimless as a premise for an Asterix adventure.

## BOOK 21

# Asterix and Caesar's Gift

French title: *Le Cadeau de César* (Caesar's Gift)

First published: 1974. Translated: 1977

**PLOT** An innkeeper arrives in the Village and, at his wife's insistence, tries to be elected chief . . .

**COMMENTS** Politics provides the impetus for this adventure, which was published in the same year that Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was elected French



president. Uderzo revisited the theme later in *The Great Divide*, but here Goscinny's satirical eye is focused on the electioneering process, rather than on specific parties.

The idea of expanding Asterix's world beyond the Village is carried another step forward here. In fact we do not even see the Village until page 10.

To all alert Asterix fans, the figure second from the left on page 6, panel 8 should be familiar. He is the French TV personality and film director Pierre Tchernia, a long-time friend of Goscinny and Uderzo. He has often been involved in the Asterix films, and appears in no fewer than five books: *Legionary* (page 37), *Corsica* (page 8), *Caesar's Gift*, *Obelix and Co.* (page 6) and *Belgium* (page 8). In each book the authors demoted him so that, after starting as one of Caesar's generals, he finishes as a common legionary.

## BOOK 22

# Asterix and the Great Crossing

French title: *La Grande Traversée* (The Great Crossing)

First published: 1975. Translated: 1976

**PLOT** What begins as a simple fishing trip ends with Asterix and Obelix discovering America. And they get there just before the Vikings . . .

**COMMENTS** This adventure begins with Uderzo's boldest opening to date: a completely blank page.

After a run of 'issue-led' Asterix books, *Great Crossing* returns to the simplicity of a straight adventure. And following Asterix's visit to America, great efforts were made to establish a popular base for the entire series in the USA. The album was in fact re-translated for American readers, and the seventh Asterix film was an adaptation of *Great Crossing*, made entirely in English.

The American edition of *Great Crossing* is by Robert Steven Cohen. It is a perfectly creditable translation, using expressions like 'Way to go, Dogmatix!' where the English has 'Well done, Dogmatix!' But it has not helped to make Asterix as big in America as he is in so many other countries. There are many theories about the Americans' relative indifference to Asterix: the humour is too European, the jokes too complex, the Roman Empire not part of their history. One attractive argument is that, since Asterix was originally created in



a spirit of mild defiance against American culture, it would be surprising if Americans *did* take him to their hearts.

A detail of technique: the black clouds on page 15 were created by Uderzo's own thumbprints.

## BOOK 23

### Obelix and Co

French title: *Obélix et Compagnie*

First published: 1976. Translated: 1978

**PLOT** A Roman economist is sent to try and make the Gauls decadent by interesting them in money. His strategy is to buy menhirs, but the menhir market unexpectedly explodes . . .

**COMMENTS** Back on that ever-popular theme, money, this adventure takes the satire on modern life further than ever before. The main protagonist, Caius Preposterus, is a caricature of France's then Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. To foil Preposterus' plan Asterix has to do virtually nothing (which suggests that Chirac's economic policies are self-defeating). But as ever, most of the fun comes from the character comedy and the petty squabbles between the villagers.

You might notice that Mrs Geriatrix appears to be drawn in greater-than-usual detail – almost naturalistically in fact – on pages 25, panel 1 and 27, panel 8. Is there any significance in this? Uderzo's answer is typically Gallic: 'I took the opportunity to go into a little extra detail because this was a close-up . . . besides, I like drawing beautiful women.'

## BOOK 24

### Asterix in Belgium

French title: *Astérix chez les Belges*

First published: 1979. Translated: 1980

**PLOT** The Gauls hear that Caesar has pronounced the Belgians the bravest of all Gaulish peoples, and they don't like it. Asterix, Obelix and Vitalstatistix go to Belgium to clear the matter up . . .



**COMMENTS** To appreciate this adventure, you have to understand the relationship between the French and the Belgians.

**Uderzo says:** 'It's really very simple. The French and the Belgians are related by a common language (the French-speaking Belgians that is, not the Flemish-speaking Belgians). But the French like to make fun of the Belgians. The French-speaking Belgians in turn make fun of the Flemish Belgians, but they also feel the same way about the French as the French do about them. At the end of the day, we all love each other.'

This was the last Asterix book Goscinny wrote before his sudden death, but, while it is not his greatest work, it shows no sign of a falling-off in standards. One minor criticism that might be levelled at *Belgium* (although this is as much a matter of taste as a criticism) is the rather heavy-handed way it displays its literary and artistic sources. Asterix has always been peppered with cultural references (such as the sword-fight in *Caesar's Gift*, which in the French edition is derived from *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand, and in the English from *Hamlet*). Normally however these are left for the reader to discover in his or her own time, rather than being pointed out so openly as they are on *Belgium's* title page.

## Phase Five: 1980-1991, "The Real and The Cartoon"



OVER the course of the five books that Uderzo has both written and drawn himself his style has undergone a subtle development; a gradual consolidation rather than a new departure. He now spends more time on his artwork than ever before, and his skill at depicting minute changes in mood and character has continued to intensify. As a result, some of the most familiar Gauls (in particular Asterix, Cacofonix and Vitalstatistix) have

become more realistic, with complex, expression-filled faces – a long way from the clear, innocent shapes of the mid-sixties [see previous page]. At the same time, however, 'guest' characters like Melodrama, Watziznehm and Bravura show that the artist is still a master of the simple line drawing.

## BOOK 25

# Asterix and the Great Divide

French title: *Le Grand Fossé* (The Great Ditch)

First published: 1980. Translated: 1981

**PLOT** A village in Gaul is politically and physically divided by a deep ditch. Asterix, Obelix and Getafix are summoned to heal the rift . . .

**COMMENTS** Uderzo's debut as Asterix writer/artist is a combination of three elements: a reworking of *Romeo and Juliet* (acknowledged in the English translation by naming Melodrama's nurse 'Angelica' – the equivalent character's name in Shakespeare's original), a political satire, and an interesting subplot about the Romans' obsession with slaves. The Great Divide itself was inspired by the then-standing Berlin Wall.

With Uderzo at the helm, Getafix's extensive skill with different kinds of magic gets more use than in many previous books. As well as concocting the magic potion, here he causes people to lose their memories, inflate and then shrink. Asterix's world as seen by Uderzo is in general a more enchanted, fairytale place than that seen by Goscinny. *Black Gold* includes a talking fly, *Secret Weapon* features a dragon, and in *Magic Carpet* (page 19) Dogmatix actually speaks for the first and only time.

Histrionix, drawn in a semi-realistic way, recalls Uderzo's earlier romantic male lead, Tragicomix, in *Legionary*.

**Uderzo says:** 'That is true, but I regret this character. He is too realistic. Although he has a serious role in the story I should have made him more grotesque. I won't make the same mistake again.'



# Asterix and the Black Gold

French title: *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (The Odyssey of Asterix)

First published: 1981, Translated: 1982

**PLOT** The magic potion's recipe calls for a drop of rock oil, and Getafix has run out. Asterix, Obelix and a treacherous druidical double-agent travel to the Middle East to find some more . . .

**COMMENTS** In many ways a more confident book than its predecessor, *Black Gold* contains some beautiful artwork (page 11 for example).

The book is dedicated to René Goscinny (who also appears as a character on pages 34 and 35). Did Uderzo feel this dedication was appropriate since Goscinny was Jewish, and the book is set partly in Israel?

**Uderzo says:** 'Yes. But you know, Goscinny had something of a complex about his Jewish origins, having lost many of his relatives during the war. He was very aware of his Jewish identity, but felt he could not write a story set in the Jewish State because he feared he would be accused of writing propaganda for Israel. We were invited by the Israeli government to visit their country, because they wanted us to use it as a location for Asterix. That is why this book is dedicated to Goscinny: it is the one adventure that was easier for me to write than for him.'



## Asterix and Son

French title: *Le Fils d'Astérix* (The Son of Asterix)

First published: 1983. Translated: 1983

**PLOT** A baby mysteriously appears on Asterix's doorstep. Who does he belong to? Why are the Romans so keen on stealing him? And how do you stop him crying? .

**COMMENTS** *Asterix and Son* is the second-best-selling of all the Asterix books in France, and soon after it was published Albert Uderzo was awarded France's highest civil honour, the Légion d'Honneur.

The adventure is impressive for its sheer, brazen originality. To finish with the Village in smouldering ruins and the Gauls reconciled with Caesar is entirely unexpected. It feels like the end of the entire series, with the Romans finally beaten – not into submission, but into true friendship, 'Pax Galla'.

**Uderzo says:** 'Actually, every time I finish an album I feel that it is the last Asterix adventure. But this is a big ending: the Gauls are friends with Caesar and the banquet takes place on a ship instead of in the Village. I came in for a lot of criticism over that. The readers insist on the traditions being maintained. It's very difficult, because when I start a new adventure I have to create something fresh as well as keeping all the leit-motifs. If I leave out the pirates, or the fish fights, or any other traditional ingredient, people complain. It's not easy. But it's a job.'



# Asterix and the Magic Carpet

French title: *Astérix chez Rahazade* (Asterix and Rahazade)

Rahazade is Princess Orinjade's name in French,  
and the title is a pun on the Indian tale of *Sheherazade*

First published: 1987. Translated: 1988

**PLOT** An Indian fakir arrives in the Village on a flying carpet. His drought-ridden country needs the help of Cacofonix, whose voice causes downpours whenever he sings . . .

**COMMENTS** One of the challenges facing Uderzo is to keep the characters of Asterix's world evolving without contradicting what we already know about them. It was with this in mind that he extended the power of Cacofonix's singing

**Uderzo says:** 'There is a French  
saying that bad singing causes rain.  
So I took it one stage further and  
created a complete downpour  
whenever Cacofonix sings. In fact,  
if you want it to rain, I can sing  
for you . . .'

to cause rain. Had Asterix been English, the bard's voice might have caused cats and dogs to drop from the sky

Page 43: Hoodunnit refers to *Iznogoud*, a strip written by Goscinny and illustrated by the artist Tabary. A parody of *The Thousand and One Nights*, its central character is a wicked Grand Vizier, whose catch-phrase 'I want to be caliph instead of

the caliph' is echoed here. (*Iznogoud*'s adventures were translated into English by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge. They were published by Egmont-Methuen immediately after *Dumpah-Pah*, but have never been reprinted.<sup>18</sup>)



# Asterix and the Secret Weapon

French title: *La Rose et Le Glaive* (The Rose and the Sword)

First published: 1991. Translated: 1991

**PLOT** The women of the Village hire a new schoolteacher, Bravura, whose innovative notions drive all the men out. Meanwhile the Romans have hit on a new way of attacking the Gauls . . .

**COMMENTS** This Asterix book was the first to be published simultaneously in every European country. It meant a long, arduous publicity tour for Uderzo, but it demonstrated Asterix's commitment to international harmony.

The theme of this adventure, feminism, excites different emotions wherever the book is discussed.

**Uderzo says:** '*My position is that it is possible to laugh at both the anti-feminist and the feminist viewpoints. There are two sides to every subject. In Canada I was badly criticised by a Montreal journalist, who said that my book will lead to more battered wives.* (The part of the book in question is page 23, panel 8, where Asterix knocks Bravura unconscious.) *In French Canada this is a big problem, and an association has been set up to counter it. I met the same journalist the following day. By then her fifteen-year-old daughter had read the book, and she thought her mother was over-reacting.*'

This particular adventure will no doubt continue to divide readers. On the one hand it laughs at old-fashioned stereotypes of female behaviour. But on the other its main protagonist Bravura is presented as intelligent, resourceful and certainly no bimbo. Perhaps it is best to bear in mind the one aspect of Asterix that has never changed: he is not to be taken seriously.

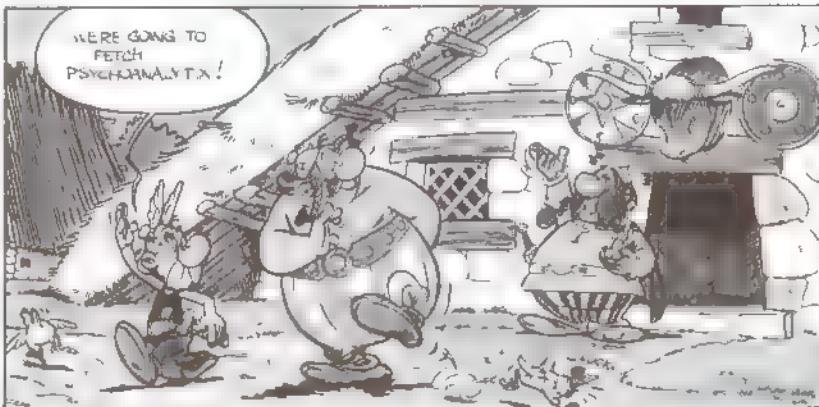


## BONUS SECTION 2

# A SOFT SPOT FOR CHICKENS



Extract from an interview held by the author with Albert Uderzo



**A.U.** No, I like drawing chickens. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it is because chickens always seem a little bit stupid. I like stupid things.



**P.K.** Do you keep chickens yourself?

**A.U.** No. But when I was little I used to play with chickens. I would take our neighbours' chickens back to our house, go upstairs and drop them out of the window.

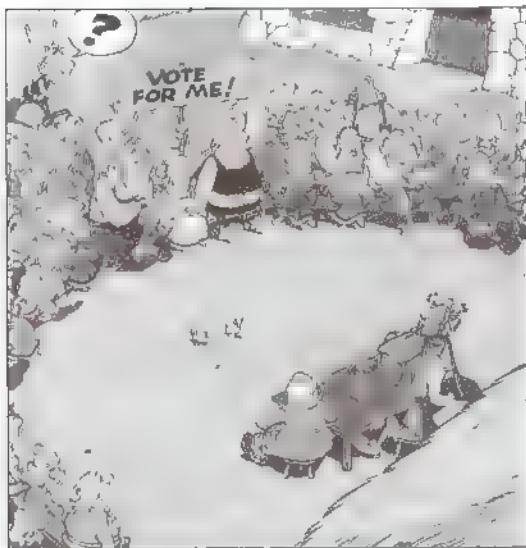


**P.K.** That sounds rather cruel

**A.U.** Not at all! It was great fun, because you see chickens can fly just a little bit. I never hurt them – it was only one storey up. But it's true that the chicken is one of the funniest of all animals

**P.K.** Chickens are just one example of many little animals that appear in your drawings

**A.U.** Yes, I like drawing boars and other animals. But I've no particular obsession with any of them . . . except chickens.



## CHAPTER THREE

# I DON'T UNDERSTAND A WORD OF IT!

## TRANSLATING ASTERIX



**T**HREE are two people who probably know more about Asterix than anyone outside France: Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge. They are the official English translators, and have been enjoying their job enormously for the last twenty-six years. Every Asterix reader is familiar with their names, but who are they?

## MEET THE TRANSLATORS



**A**NTHEA BELL is a charming, highly intelligent, self-confessed eccentric. She lives in a cottage just outside Cambridge, and works as a professional translator. When Asterix is not taking up her time, she translates a wide range of books – some of them very academic – from both French and German. A recent project was a biography of Germany's ex-Chancellor Willy Brandt.

Anthea Bell shares her home with an unpredictable number of pedigree Birman cats, all named after characters in Shakespeare. She has an astonishing ability to learn a new language in a matter of weeks, and is also a superb and meticulous cook. If creating puns is a genetic gift, then the skill she shows in Asterix undoubtedly derives from her father Adrian, who was the first crossword compiler for *The Times*. 'You tend to regard these things as work, not relaxation', she says, 'if your parent has been in the habit of trying clues out on his family, appearing at breakfast with the query, "Die of cold (3,4)?"' (The answer is 'ice cube'. Think about it.)



DEREK HOCKRIDGE has been well described as 'very . . . English: robust, good-humoured, but expressing himself with a diffidence, because it's good manners to do so'.<sup>19</sup>

He is a man with a wide variety of interests. An ex-Lecturer in Modern Languages at Leicester Polytechnic, he now goes to Bordeaux for two months a year, where he teaches mature American students about either Eleanor of Aquitaine, or wine, on both of which subjects he is a self-effacing expert.

He has also been an international squash player (for Wales, although he is not Welsh), and an occasional actor. He spent four years as the Clerk of Court in the TV series *Crown Court*, and even had small parts in Granada TV's *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown*.

When Brockhampton Press (as the children's arm of Hodder & Stoughton was known in the 1960s) decided to translate Asterix, the intention was that Hockridge, as a lecturer and frequent visitor to France, would ensure that every scrap of topical, cultural and morphological humour had been spotted in the French, and Bell, as a translator would find suitable English equivalents. 'In fact we have often exchanged roles, and we came to work very much as a team. Collaboration is a useful way of tackling humour in general'.<sup>20</sup>

## THE TRANSLATING KIT

WHEN a new Asterix book is in production, the translators are sent a copy of the text so that they can start work on their version. Often, at this stage, they are working 'blind', without the artwork.

In recent years Uderzo has compiled detailed lists of the wordplay and cultural jokes in his texts. These he circulates to all foreign translators, so that they can be sure of not missing a single trick when combing through the narrative.

Anthea Bell describes the process: 'Besides the French original, we have what might be called our translating kit around us. There's a folder labelled "Asterix - Names, Jokes, Oddments, Etc.", full of things that might come in useful some day. There are reference books. It's amazing how often people say, "But you're a translator; surely you don't need dictionaries?" Translators need the biggest, best dictionaries going. Translators wear out their dictionaries. Among our old favourites are *Walker's Rhyming Dictionary*, the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, *Roget's Thesaurus* and the new *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, easily the best of the Oxford English Dictionary range for this purpose, being the most up-to-date and "colloq.", as the entries put it. Any of



these may set the mind jumping from word or phrase (a) in the original French, to a related subject, to word or phrase (b) which will provide a comparable bit of wordplay in English.<sup>21</sup>

Also part of the Bell-Hockridge kit is a set of six principles, which they always employ when translating Asterix:

- 1 The idea is to render, as faithfully as possible, *the feel of the original*.
- 2 With humour of this intensely verbal nature, the translation must follow the spirit rather than the letter of the original; we must therefore often *find jokes which are different, though we hope along the same lines* as the French jokes.
- 3 They must, of course, suit Albert Uderzo's wittily detailed drawings. In particular they must *fit the expressions on the speakers' faces*.
- 4 From the purely technical point of view, they must be *about the same length as the original wording*, or we shall create difficulties for the letterer trying to get the English text into the speech-bubbles.
- 5 Very important: we will try for *the same kind of mixture of jokes as in the French*, where Asterix appeals on a number of different levels. There's the story-line itself with its ever-attractive theme of the clever little fellow outwitting the hulking great brute; there is simple knockabout humour, both verbal and visual, which goes down well with quite young children; there are puns and passages of wordplay for older children; and there is some distinctly sophisticated humour, depending on literary or artistic allusion, for the adult or near-adult mind.
- 6 We will also have *the same number of jokes as in the French*. If we just can't get one in at the same point as in the original, we'll make up for it somewhere else. If there is an obvious gift we'll use it, even if there was no counterpart in the French.<sup>22</sup>



For example, the English sound for a hiccup is 'Hic!', so in the English version legionaries can get drunk in Latin: 'Hic, haec, hoc' whereas the French must be content with their usual word 'Hips!'

# THE DREADED PUN

PUNS are virtually synonymous with Asterix. Goscinny loved puns because he loved juggling with words, and he punctuated almost every page with them. They are notoriously difficult to translate though. If you simply translate the words, the joke vanishes into thin air, so the translators have constantly to come up with their own wordplay, while leaving the original sense intact.

Fortunately English, with a lexicon twice the size of any other European language, is arguably the language of puns. And sure enough, Hockridge and Bell have always delivered 'I like to feel the level of punning is about the same as the French,' muses Hockridge, 'so if you groan, that seems about right.'<sup>23</sup>

While some puns are long-serving standbys (most noticeably the use of 'boor' and 'bore' in the context of 'boars'), others can be more complicated. The entry of the teams in *Olympic Games* is accompanied in the French by a string of puns on the athletes' places of origin.

The French phrase '*Ceux de Milo sont venus aussi*' contains a pun on the ancient Greek statue the *Venus of Milo*, which stands in the Louvre Museum, Paris. Unfortunately the sentence translates, rather unexcitingly, as 'Those from Milos have also come.' So the translators dropped Milos in favour of the ancient Greek town of Eleusis, and produced 'Some of the competitors from Attica are mysteriously elusive' – brilliant, and at the same time groaningly awful.

Tintin, the traditional publishing rival of Asterix, never used puns. In his book *Tintin: Hergé and his Creation*, Harry Thompson tells us this is because 'Hergé disliked wordplay, pointing to Asterix (perhaps with a modicum of professional jealousy) as an example of how not to do it.'<sup>24</sup> But puns are perfect for Asterix's mildly anarchic stance: even language is not safe when he is around.



# COLLIDING CULTURES

A GREAT challenge for translators is the joke which does not depend on language, but on cultural background. Cultural humour is particularly difficult to tackle when it forms the backbone of a story. *Asterix in Britain*, for example, depends on the readers being able to understand all the jibes about English stereotypes. English readers of course have no problem with that one, but they are much more at sea when it comes to *Asterix in Belgium* or *Asterix in Corsica*. Imagine how confused the French would be if faced with *Asterix in Wales*, there would be constant references to 'the valleys', everybody would keep bursting into spontaneous, deep-chested song, and the word 'boyo' would be rather hard to avoid. Your average Parisian would be completely lost.

Bell and Hockridge's technique for dealing with cultural humour is to focus in on those aspects of the subject that readers of English *will* understand. An example is the central character of *Corsica*, Boneywasawarriorwayayix. The starting point is: what do English readers know about Corsica? Answer: Napoleon Buonaparte was born there.

In French, this character is called Ocatarinetabellatchitchix, which is a well-known line from a pop song by a Corsican singer called Tino Rossi. Tino Rossi is very popular in France. And in Corsica. But not nearly enough



English speakers have heard of the singer, let alone the song. Fortunately, the ever-resourceful translators brought to mind the shanty which goes 'Boney was a warrior, way ay ah, Boney was a warrior, John François,' and the character had a name.

The limited number of reference points available to

the English reader of *Corsica* means that, while it is a stupendous feat of translation, the book can never have quite the same richness that it holds for French readers.

# NAMES, NAMES AND MORE NAMES

If THERE is one aspect of Asterix that takes up more of the translators' time than any other, it is the names of the characters. This is also the area in which Bell and Hockridge's efforts have occasionally been praised even more highly than the original French. Funny though **Assurancetourix** is (meaning 'Fully comprehensive car insurance'), it is less appropriate to the character than his English name: **Cacofonix**.

Occasionally a name turns up which does not need to be translated, like **Stratocumulus** (the Centurion of Aquarium in *Asterix in Britain*). But in virtually every case, an equivalent has to be found. 'We are pleased when, like Goscinny, we can make a whole phrase into a Roman name (**Sendervictorius** and **Appianglorius**, a couple of Roman soldiers\*), but owing to the difference between the normal word order of noun and adjective in English and French it is generally much harder to make up such compounds in English. We do however have quantities of English adjectives ending **-ous**, which can sometimes be used on their own to make a name approximating to its bearer's character (**Insalubrious** in *Gladiator*), or combined with a noun to give a Roman two names (**Nervus Illitus** in *Banquet*)'.<sup>25</sup>

Some names do begin to show their age after a few years, and it is debatable whether they should be updated with new editions. Selective Employment Tax was abolished in the early 1970s, leaving the Briton **Selectivemponmen-tax** (from *Legionary*) high and dry. **Haraldwillsen** from *Great Crossing* means less and less to younger readers (**Michaeljakken** might strike a clearer chord?). And the Greater Latin Council flats inhabited by Instantmix in *Gladiator* have outlasted the Greater London Council on which they are based. Any book is a product of its time, however. We do not expect Orwell's *1984* to be retitled just because the future in which it is set has now become our past.

Bell and Hockridge have been known to go into intensely detailed discussions in order to get just the right name for a character. A case in point is the British chieftain **Mykingdomforanos**, whose name in the French original is **Zebigbos** – in itself a French pronunciation of the English phrase 'The big boss'. Here is the text of part of a letter written by Anthea Bell to the editor at Brockhampton Press in 1969:

*The situation is a bit complicated because **Zebigbos**, on the analogy of **Cassivellaunos**, of course, is the only British **-os** ending in the book. So having once decided to alter the name (I stick out for this myself,*

\* From *Asterix the Gladiator* page 37  
Note how the second name also ingeniously relates to the Roman road The Appian Way



because that **Z** is no longer amusing in itself once the book's all in English, and **Thebigbos** doesn't look right) do we try for an **-os** name, or do we use an **-ax** name, as for all the other Britons?

\* Although not used this time **Neverattalos** resurfaced a few years later in **mus** one **t** as the Greek volunteer in **Asterix the Legionary**.

We tried various names like **Attalos**, **Neverattalos\***, **Ratherattalos**; and I have by me a beer-stained piece of paper bearing the contributions **Ridakokos** and **Banberikros**, and **Mykingdomforanos**.

I rather feel that if it's an **-os** name it should be a **-nos** ending, just to make the isolated analogy clear to all and sundry. And it would be possible to use an English **-nous** ending, such as we use for Roman names, and spell it **-nos**. (Fair enough, since **Cassivellaunos** often ends **-us** himself.) Which provides us with a few efforts such as **Simpliravenos**, **Indigenos**, **Verivoluminos**.

Or then we could make the chief an **-ax** ending, like the other Britons; we have a good many **-ax** names left over, none of them specially applicable to the chief's character. **Sealingwax**, **Beeswax**, **Nervusattax**, **Biliusattax**, **Vacuumpax**, **Unionjax**, **Hijax** and **Halfbax** are among the **-ax** compounds we have left.

Goscinnny himself was brought into the fray over this one, and in a letter dated July 15 1969 to Antony Kamm, then Chief Editor at Brockhampton Press, he said:

*Concerning the name **Zebigbos**, I don't think you should keep the **-os** ending, which I used to make a pun (even if I like very much **Verivoluminos**). Any name ending in **-ax** would be just as good.*

On this occasion Goscinnny's advice was not followed, but perhaps we should be grateful, for the sake of the sanity of all concerned, that not every name in **Asterix** causes this much debate.

## DRAWBACKS WITH DIALECTS

**A** FEW books – *Banquet*, *Chieftain's Shield* and the first part of *Corsica* – make great play with French regional accents. Rather than translate these into different, British regional accents, Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge chose to bring their sixth principle into play, and compensate for the jettisoned accents with some extra wordplay. At times this meant some extensive and imaginative rewriting: the text of *Chieftain's Shield* pages 16 and 17 bears



# THE ASTERIX LANGUAGES

Asterix's adventures have appeared in a vast number of languages and dialects – the current total is seventy. Here is a complete checklist, including those editions that are no longer in print and those that are planned for the near future.

Afrikaans	Czech
Alsatian	Danish
American English	Dutch
Arabic ★	English
Argentinian	Esperanto
Basque ★	Estonian ★
Bengali ★	Finnish
Bernese	Flemish
Brazilian	French
Breton	Friesian ★
Bulgarian	Galician ★
Burmese ★	German
Byelorussian ★	Greek (ancient)
Cantonese	Greek (modern)
Castilian	Greenlandic
Catalan	Gujarati ★
Corsican ★	Hebrew ★
Croatian	Hindi ◊

◊ = no longer in print.

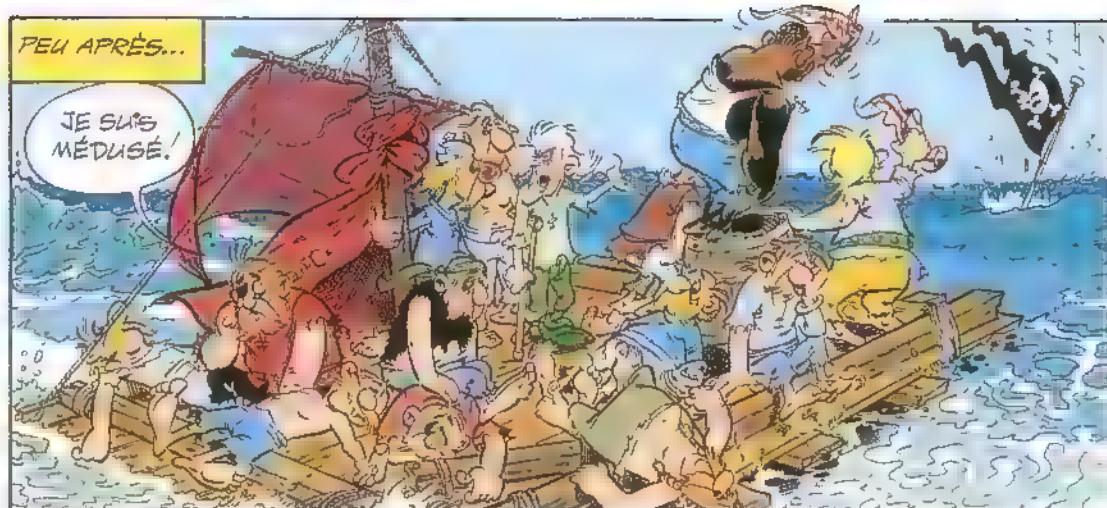
★ = in negotiation or due to appear in print

Note how many small, fiercely independent regions, like the Baltic States and the Basque region of northern Spain, have chosen to translate Asterix. Readers in these areas no doubt identify with the theme of holding out against larger oppressors.

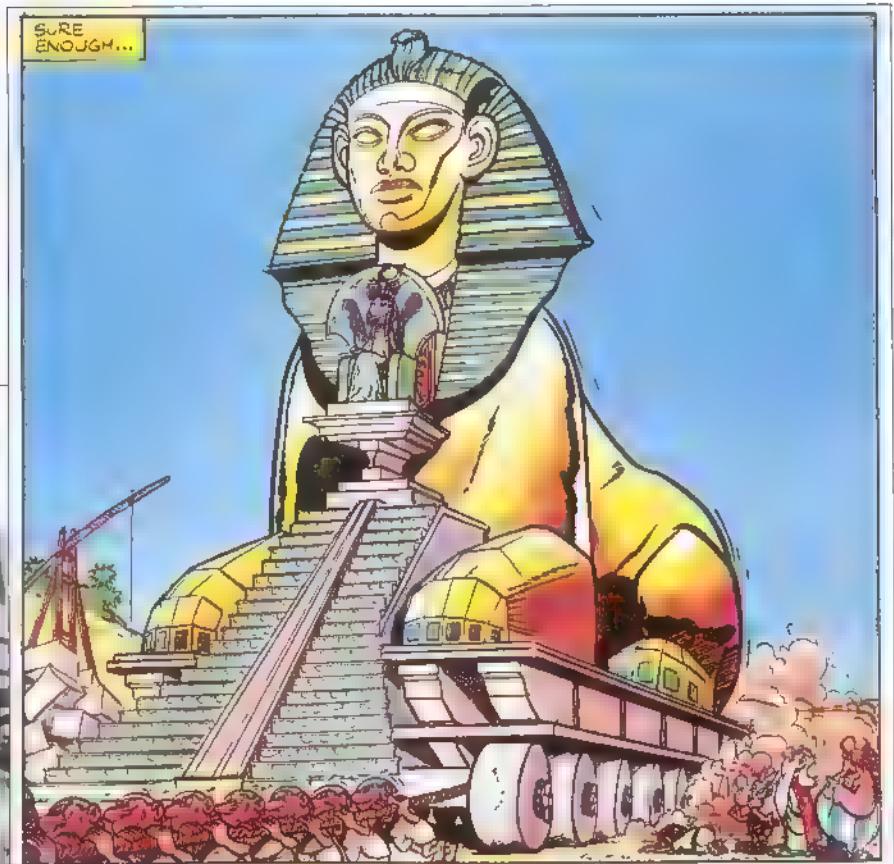
Hungarian	Portuguese
Icelandic ★	Rheto-romance ★
Indonesian	Romanian ★
Italian	Russian ★
Japanese ★	Scottish Gaelic ★
Kampuchean ★	Serbian
Korean	Slovakian
Languedoc	Slovenian
Laotian ★	Swabian
Latin	Swedish
Latvian ★	Telegu
Lithuanian ★	Thai
Luxembourgish	Turkish ★
Malayalam ★	Valencian ★
Mandarin	Vietnamese ★
Marathi ★	Welsh ◊
Norwegian	
Polish	



Asterix the  
Legionary page  
35 'The Raft of  
the Medusa' by  
Theodore  
Géricault

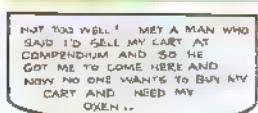


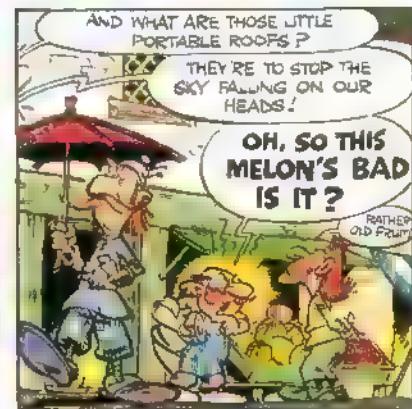
Cleopatra – the Asterix version and  
the Hollywood version (see page 31)





The original and  
redrawn versions  
of *Asterix the  
Gaul* pages 35  
(see pages **27**  
and **28**)





Above: Asterix in Britain page 24

Left and below: One of the rare redraws to be found in the English translations (see page 31)



# HOW TO CREATE AN ASTERIX BOOK



## STAGE 1

The hard part, as Albert Uderzo readily admits, is coming up with an idea.

He and Goscinny would discuss possible Asterix adventures for hours – sometimes days – before hitting on a theme that appealed to them both. The inspiration could come from a variety of sources: a part of the world Asterix had not yet explored; a historical object like a golden sickle or a laurel wreath; or sometimes a similarity between a modern-day preoccupation and an ancient custom (like prize-fights and historical battles between rival chieftains in *Asterix and the Big Fight*, or modern fortune-tellers and ancient augurers in *Asterix and the Soothsayer*).

## STAGE 2

Once the main theme had been agreed, Goscinny would originate the detailed story alone. He would boil it down to forty-four paragraphs, one for each page of the story. Each paragraph would be between ten and fifteen lines long, so that each line could roughly correspond to a panel in the final book. When this synopsis was complete he would hand it over to Uderzo.

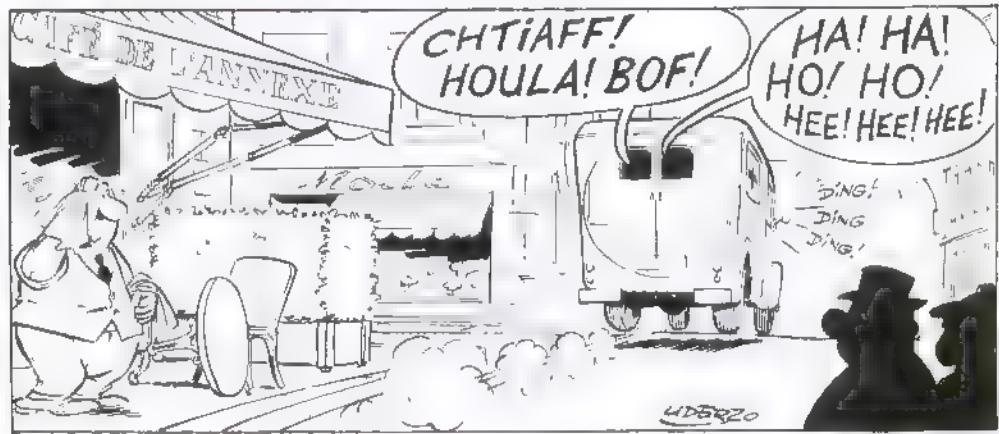
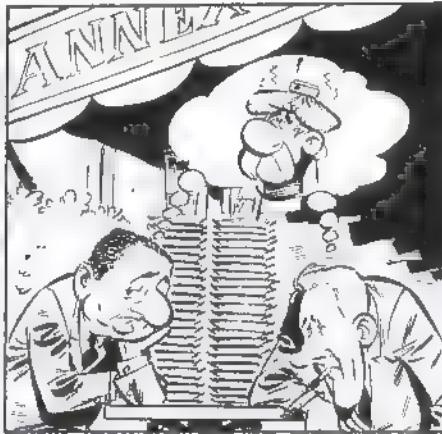
## STAGE 3

Uderzo would then start work on any new characters or historical research called for by the synopsis. For *Asterix in Switzerland* and *Asterix in Corsica* he went on research trips to the countries involved, and took many photos to work from back in his studio. He would also devise some purely visual gags to complement the humour of the main story.

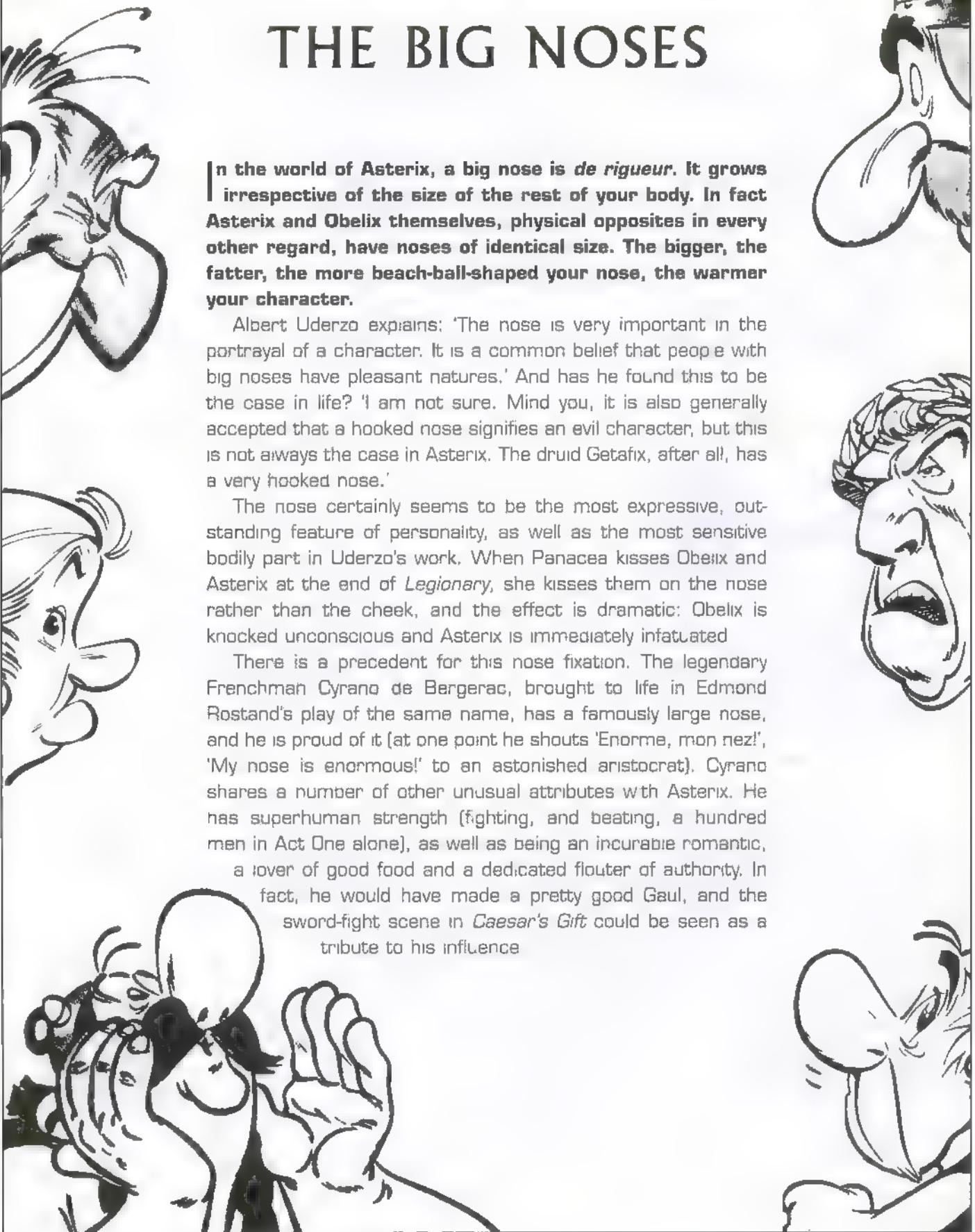
At the same time Goscinny would begin writing out a detailed, panel-by-panel script of the entire book. He would do this in two columns, with a description of each picture on the left, and the corresponding dialogue on the right.

## STAGE 4

Only when the script was complete would it be sent to Uderzo – and then only two or three pages at a time, so that he could give his full concentration to each part of the book in turn.



# THE BIG NOSES



In the world of Asterix, a big nose is *de rigueur*. It grows irrespective of the size of the rest of your body. In fact Asterix and Obelix themselves, physical opposites in every other regard, have noses of identical size. The bigger, the fatter, the more beach-ball-shaped your nose, the warmer your character.

Albert Uderzo explains: 'The nose is very important in the portrayal of a character. It is a common belief that people with big noses have pleasant natures.' And has he found this to be the case in life? 'I am not sure. Mind you, it is also generally accepted that a hooked nose signifies an evil character, but this is not always the case in Asterix. The druid Getafix, after all, has a very hooked nose.'

The nose certainly seems to be the most expressive, outstanding feature of personality, as well as the most sensitive bodily part in Uderzo's work. When Panacea kisses Obelix and Asterix at the end of *Legionary*, she kisses them on the nose rather than the cheek, and the effect is dramatic: Obelix is knocked unconscious and Asterix is immediately infatuated.

There is a precedent for this nose fixation. The legendary Frenchman Cyrano de Bergerac, brought to life in Edmond Rostand's play of the same name, has a famously large nose, and he is proud of it (at one point he shouts 'Enorme, mon nez!', 'My nose is enormous!' to an astonished aristocrat). Cyrano shares a number of other unusual attributes with Asterix. He has superhuman strength (fighting, and beating, a hundred men in Act One alone), as well as being an incurable romantic, a lover of good food and a dedicated flouter of authority. In fact, he would have made a pretty good Gaul, and the sword-fight scene in *Caesar's Gift* could be seen as a tribute to his influence.

almost no resemblance to the equivalent pages in *Le Bouclier Arverne*, where all the humour revolves around the regional tendency to pronounce *s* as *sh*.

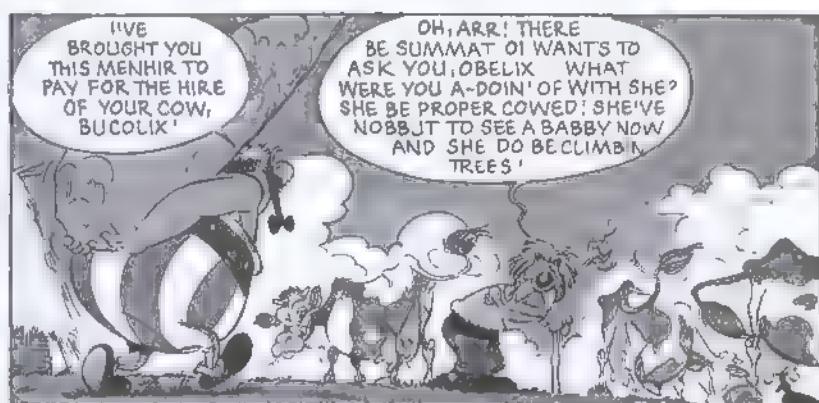
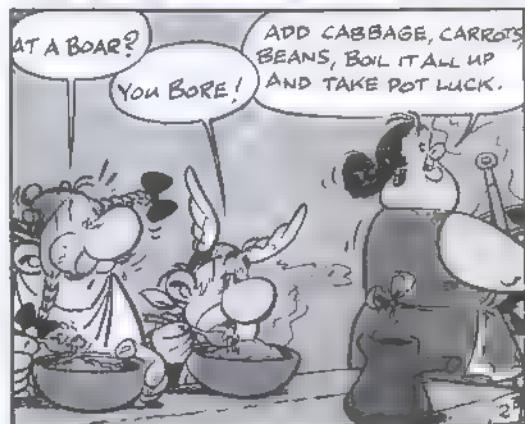
'The thinking behind this procedure,' explains Bell, 'is that if one substitutes regional English accents, the whole delicate illusion of translation is endangered: "What's this man with the Yorkshire or Somerset accent doing in the middle of ancient Gaul?" thinks the reader. "Surely it's France now. Why aren't they speaking French anyway? This is only a translation! Why am I bothering to read something in translation anyway?"'<sup>26</sup>

Curiously, this rule does not seem to apply to spoken renditions of Asterix's adventures. Bell recalls a radio version in which the Gauls spoke convincingly with cockney accents. Perhaps the faster pace of performance over print disguises the basic illogicality of the accent.

The translators have relaxed their rule in the case of one character. This is Bucolix, a Gaulish villager who is heard to speak only on page 19 of *Asterix and Son* (right).

He is given a general-purpose 'Mummerset' accent and on this occasion it does not seem to be out of place, because Bucolix, despite his unique *argot*, is after all one of the villagers, and not a regional type.

One regular character's accent has a particularly interesting history. The black pirate (who is normally to be found in the crow's nest of his doomed ship until Asterix and Obelix remove the mast) speaks, in the French versions, with a strong accent inspired by the inhabitants of the former French colonies in Africa. For his first three appearances, the translators gave him the same mode of speech in English. But later they decided that this was not acceptable



*Asterix and Cleopatra* page 9: the earlier and later versions

in an English language context, and they switched to the same sort of compensatory wordplay as used for French regional accents.

They also went back and updated the pirate's speech in the three earlier adventures, and the difference is marked (see previous page, bottom).

## TRIUMPHS AND TRIBULATIONS

**A**RE there any moments of which the translators are particularly proud? Derek Hockridge singles one out: *Asterix the Legionary* page 35, panel 3 (see page 66). 'The pirates have been sunk yet again, and Uderzo draws a faithful representation of Géricault's *The Raft of the "Medusa"*. The captain is saying "Je suis médusé!", a familiar way of saying "I'm stupefied!" or "dumb-struck". The joke is so neat in French. Here was going to be an obvious *perte* (loss of a joke). We came up with "We've been framed, by Jericho!" (They also added the footnote 'famous Gaulish artist' to point up the artistic allusion.) "The spirit caught, the words flying free" was perhaps the nicest comment on our translation by a Professor of French, and it's one we treasure.'<sup>27</sup>

Anthea Bell chooses a quiet, background moment, from *Asterix in Britain* page 24, panel 7 (see page 69).

Here the translators added a joke of their own. The French makes a pun on the double meaning of 'melon', which can translate into English as 'melon' or 'bowler hat' (yet another English icon). So in French the shopkeeper says 'My melon [bowler] is too dear, is it?' and the customer answers, 'It is!' The translation makes a pun on the quaint English expression 'old fruit', and Bell recalls Goscinny's response when he saw their version. 'A gleam came into his eye. "Old fruit," he said, "Ah, I wish I'd thought of that. *Vieux fruit*." It is one of our nicest memories of him.'

And have there been any particularly difficult moments? One that stands out both as a challenge but also as an example of the translators' resourcefulness is the parody of *Cyrano de Bergerac* in *Le Cadeau de César* (*Asterix and Caesar's Gift*) page 31 – not a passage that would mean a great deal to the youngest readers even in France. 'It would, we felt, be wrong to simplify. Necessary then to substitute something. Most famous swordfight in English literature? Probably Hamlet and Laertes. Lead into it as the innkeeper's wife tells her husband to take no notice of the soldier – have her add, in English, "Act with disdain." Then the Roman can reply, with perfect truth, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane", and we proceed to assorted quotations from *Hamlet*. . .



Inevitably, our version fell short of the lovely stylishness of the French, but we had to do something along those lines, since the passage cried out for a literary allusion.<sup>28</sup>

## THE ONE REGRET

FOR almost a quarter of a century Bell and Hockridge have been making fun of one of history's greatest figures: Julius Caesar. He was a soldier, a statesman, a writer and a strategist. And until recently they felt a little guilty about never taking him seriously. However, while translating a French book on the history of food, Anthea Bell came across a quotation from Caesar which stopped her feeling guilty:

'In this passage Julius Caesar tells us how the ancient Germanic tribes hunted elk. Elk, of course, have no joints in their legs (or anyway so says Caesar). If they lie down they can't get up again, so they lean against trees when they want to sleep (or anyway so says Caesar). To catch your elk, therefore, you locate its sleeping quarters, you partly saw through or uproot all the trees and then arrange them nicely to look natural. You lurk in hiding and wait for the elk to come along, feeling sleepy. The elk leans against a tree, the tree falls over, you stroll up and slaughter your elk. (Or so says Caesar.)'<sup>29</sup>

'It sounds like the original Heffalump trap . . . and one can see how it happened: Caesar wanted to write something about customs and habits of the Germans as background to his campaigns. He sent an aide out to pick up some local colour. The aide went into whatever passed for a pub in the Teutoburger Wald and bought the local wag a drink – and who says the Germans have no sense of humour?

'Still, it does make one wonder about the accuracy of Caesar's account of the Ancient Britons painting themselves blue – and it makes me feel better about my inability to take the great man seriously.'<sup>30</sup>

Bell and Hockridge do however take the translation of Asterix seriously. Their aim, in common with most translators, is to make the books look and sound as though they had been originally written in English. The mark of their success is that, despite every adventure opening with a map of France, many readers – adults and children alike – are surprised when they discover that Asterix is actually a French creation.



## BONUS SECTION 3

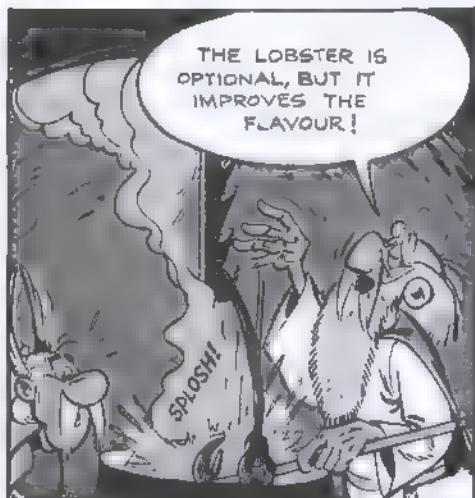
# WHAT REALLY GOES INTO THE MAGIC POTION?



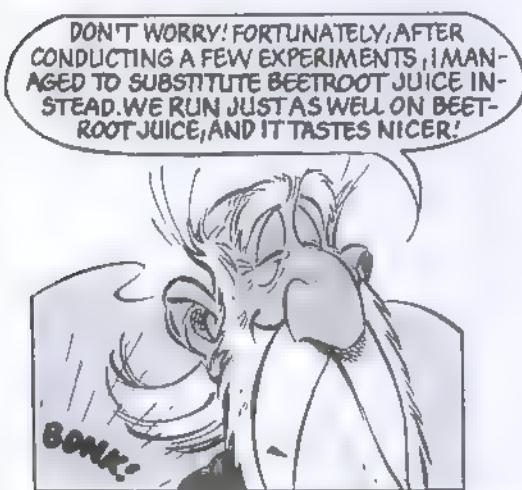
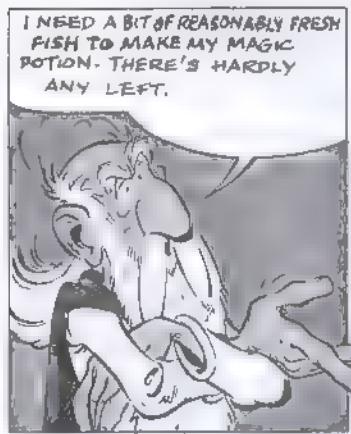
**A**lthough 'the recipe may only be handed down from druid to druid, by word of mouth', Getafix has given us the odd hint over the years. Here, for the first time, his chance remarks are brought together.



Mistletoe is the most important ingredient, and it must be cut with a golden sickle if it is to have magical properties. This is not mere fantasy. Historically, mistletoe was held as a sacred plant by the druids, and its medicinal powers have been known for hundreds of years. The eighteenth-century apothecary Culpeper declared, 'It cures failing sickness, apoplexy and palsy very speedily'.



The other ingredients lack the mystical powers of mistletoe, but are all available in the forest or sea near the Gaulish Village (except rock oil in *Black Gold* – but that can be replaced by beetroot juice).



Roots and lobster are mentioned in *Asterix the Gaul*, lucky plants in *Big Fight*, fish in *Great Crossing*, beetroot juice in *Black Gold*, and in *Asterix and the Goths* we learn both of carrots and, vital to any good recipe, a pinch of salt

All these local, natural ingredients contrast sharply with the Romans' exotic culinary abominations (like stuffed giraffe necks). The ecological point is clear: it is better to stick to natural, renewable resources than pointlessly to exploit rare commodities.



Asterix devises his own magic potion in *Laurel Wreath*: It consists of unplucked chicken, carbolic soap, jam, black peppercorns, salt, kidneys, figs, honey, black pudding, pomegranate seeds, eggs and red peppers. It is not, however, recommended that readers try this out at home.



## IMPEDIMENTA

Wife of Vitalstatistix and, as far as she is concerned, the real chief of the Village, Impedimenta made her first appearance as far back as 1966 in *Asterix and the Big Fight*, fussing over her husband as he prepared to meet rival chieftain Cassius Ceramix.

True, in this first incarnation she bore little resemblance to the Impedimenta of the 1970s, and was as yet nameless, but Vitalstatistix was unmistakeable. (How fitting that she should choose *Big Fight* for her debut. It is the very book in which Vitalstatistix himself is first developed as a character and, as ever, Impedimenta undermines his exalted idea of his own importance.)

After three more cameo roles in *Chieftain's Shield* (page 6), *Olympic Games* (page 18) and *Cauldron* (page 1), Impedimenta suddenly exploded into full, masterful life in *Roman Agent* (1970). From then on, she established herself as one of the dominant forces in Asterix's world.

Impedimenta's original French name is Bonemine. This is an abbreviation of *de bonne mine* meaning 'having beautiful features'. Goscinny and Uderzo originally intended this as a joke, but there

are many undeniably attractive qualities about Impedimenta. Despite her constant nagging and her unquenchable thirst for power, she loves her husband, and he loves her. In *Secret Weapon* she blushes coquettishly while calling him 'Piggywiggy', and in *Soothsayer* there is a distinct note of pride in the chief's voice when he says, 'That was my little Pedimenta, that was!'

Furthermore, on the few occasions when she is allowed to take command herself, Impedimenta ceases to be the stereotypical 'woman behind every great man', and proves herself a real leader, with a natural sense of authority. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Asterix and Son* page 42, when, with the Village in flames around her, she calmly calls out, 'Everybody line up in silence, and don't panic!'

Perhaps Impedimenta really is the true chief of the Village: the Earth Mother who provides food, clothing and common sense to her family of childish wayward menfolk.



## FULLIAUTOMATIX

The village ironmonger (and chief troublemaker) is as old as the very first Asterix book. At least, his name is. (In French he is known as Cétautomatix: 'It's automatic.') The character cheerfully banging away at a sword with his bare fist on page 15 of *Asterix the Gaul* is plainly not the flamboyant redhead of later years. Nor is the next

giving a legionary the same fist treatment on page 7 of *Banquet*. It is only in *Normans* that the mallet-wielding bully really begins to take shape.

Fullautomatix (whose main talent beside hand-forging steel is a remarkable ability to scratch his ear with his foot) has dedicated his life to three things: insulting Geriatrix, insulting Unhygienix, and preventing Cacofonix from singing. This last has

led to a strange, love-hate relationship between him and the bard. So determined is Fullautomatix to shut Cacofonix up that he often has to make him sing just for the pleasure of stopping him again. Rather than objecting, Cacofonix seems to accept this as his due. He only ever complains if he is bashed when he had no intention of singing anyway.

Unlike Impedimenta, Bacterix and Mrs Geriatrix, the diminutive Mrs Fullautomatix has never quite established herself as a character. Perhaps it is hard for her to emerge from behind her pugnacious husband... or perhaps her day is still to come.



# VENI, VIDI, VICI, AND ALL THEY DO IS LAUGH!

## COMEDY IN ASTERIX

'FAIRE RIRE, quel métier!' protested Goscinny, 'Making people laugh, what a job!'<sup>31</sup> But the creators of Asterix were masters of their trade. They used many different comic techniques, some verbal, some visual, some obvious, some enigmatic, so that the panels of the Asterix books are crammed with gags.

More than anything else, this is what makes Asterix so popular. Readers can go back to his adventures time after time and find new jokes to savour. (For example, it was only recently that I saw Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963), and was surprised when page 27 of *Asterix and Cleopatra* came to life half-way through the film, in the shape of the Egyptian queen's slave-drawn throne.) Goscinny often remarked that Asterix has 'different levels'. Some commentators have taken this as an indication of hidden meanings and secret, subversive messages. But it merely means different layers of humour, as pointed out by the Phoenician sailors in *Black Gold*, where one of them says, 'Every time I see it again I find something else to appreciate'.

In addition to the comedy of Goscinny's wordplay, which was discussed in the last chapter, there are many other 'levels', or types of humour, in Asterix. This chapter focuses on eight of the most important.

### LEVEL 1

#### The Art of The Speech-Bubble

GOSCINNY and Uderzo were able to use so many comic techniques because they had an instinctive sense of cooperation. This is at its most obvious in their use of speech-bubbles. Until Asterix, the speech-bubble was at best a necessary evil in comic strips: necessary, because there had to be



some way of showing the characters' thoughts and conversations; evil, because it got in the way of the artwork.

With Asterix the collaboration between writer and artist turned the speech-bubble into an art form in its own right. Uderzo amplified Goscinny's words by embellishing, shaping and colouring the bubbles, often making a visual joke of the words themselves. Here are some examples:



*Goths:* Gothic script conveys Gothic speech, while the violent images of teeth and skulls convey the most foul-mouthed swearing without causing any offence to readers – or their parents.



*Legionary:* The artificial, greetings-card images around the cook's words betray the fact that he is only pretending to be polite.



*Goths:* A simple but extremely effective technique: the shaky lettering conveys the sound of Rhetoric's voice as he is dragged along.

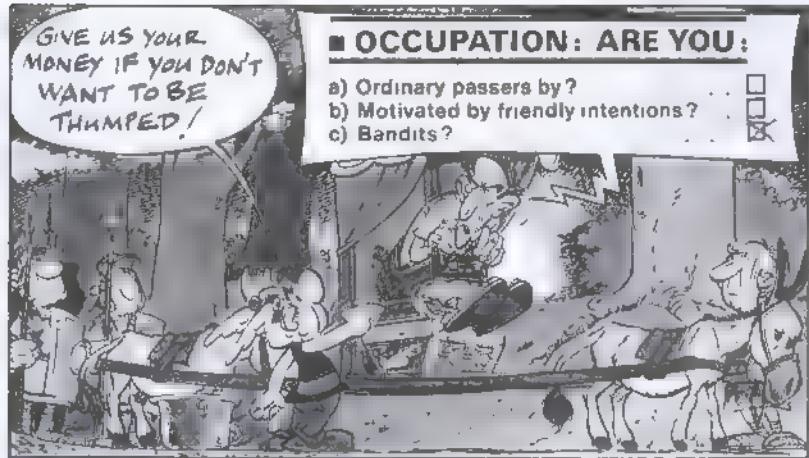


*Caesar's Gift:* The tension between Impedimenta and Angina is delicately conveyed by icicles and snow falling from the speech bubbles.





*Cleopatra:* Egyptian cockerels crow in hieroglyphics.



*Cauldron:* A tax collector speaks in the bureaucratic language of a modern-day tax return form. The inspired touch of the 'X' beside *Bandits* makes this an outstanding joke: it is clearly a piece of speech, and yet it cannot be spoken aloud.

Asterix himself is rarely the speaker of these speech-bubble jokes. As with the other types of humour used by Goscinny and Uderzo, he is normally the *observer*, rather than the *perpetrator*, of the comedy.

## LEVEL 2

### Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll

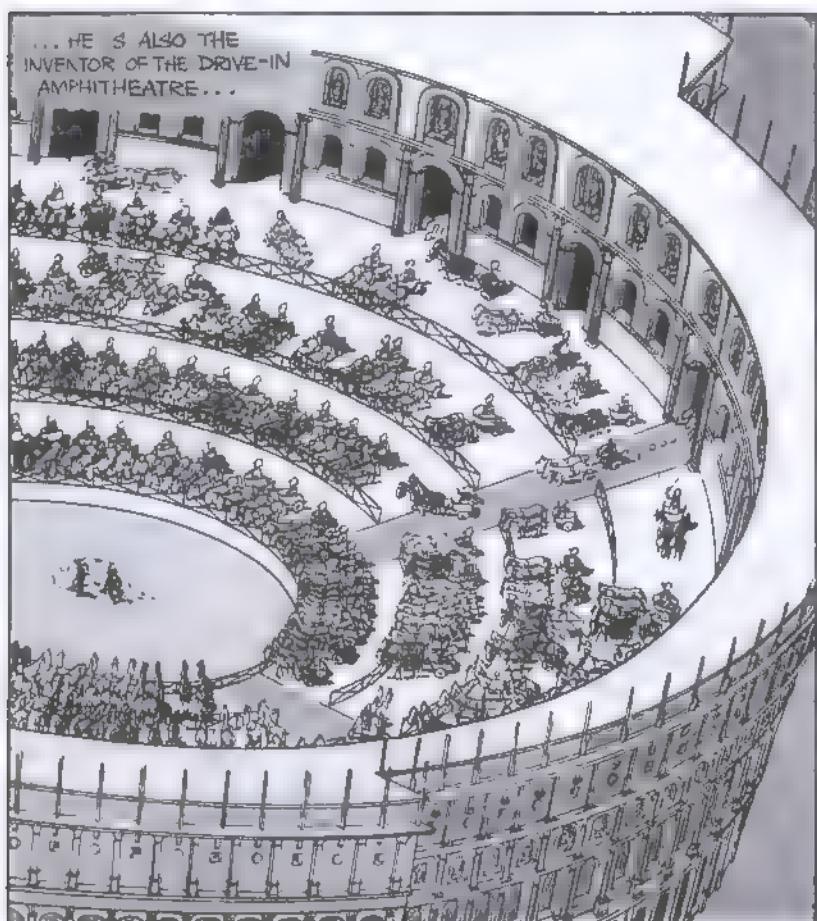
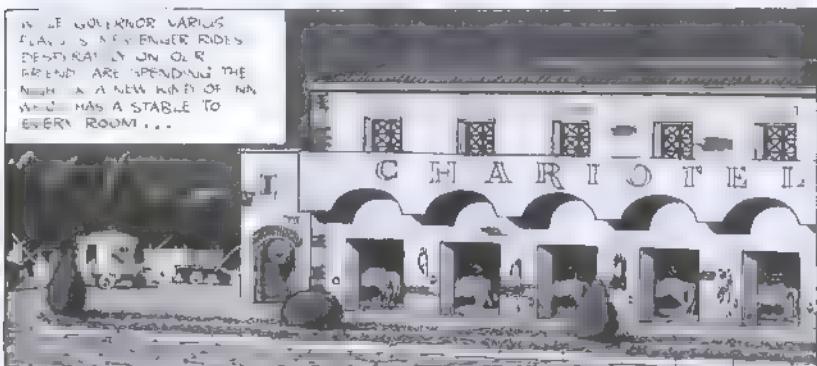
**A**NACHRONISM, in which a modern idea is transported into the world of 50bc, is probably the biggest and most-used joke in Asterix. It is the vehicle for much of the strip's cultural humour, and it is guaranteed to tickle readers, as it pokes fun at aspects of their own lives.

As well as the subjects of sexual equality in *Secret Weapon*, drugs in *Olympic Games* and rock 'n' roll in *Normans*, there are countless other examples.





Advertising, for instance, is often laughed at in Asterix. This example [from *Gladiator*] is based on the now-defunct slogan for milk: 'Drink a Pinta Milka Day'.



Above left: In *Switzerland* the modern motel becomes the ancient *chariotel*.

Above: is a perfect example of anachronism from *Golden Sickle*. The idea of being stopped for speeding is only half the joke. What makes it particularly good is the posture and expression of the legionary and the chariot driver, which have not changed in two thousand years.

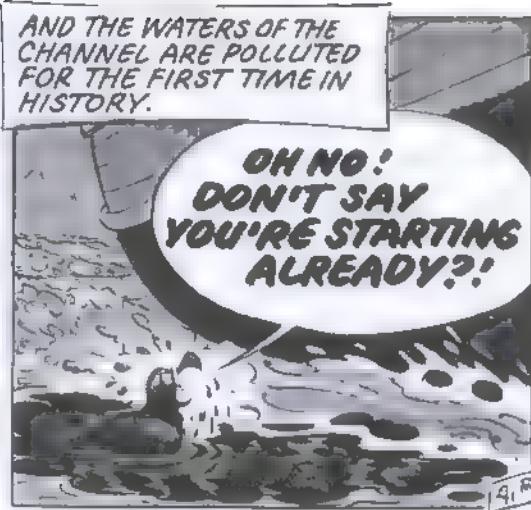
Left: In *Mansions of the Gods* the modern drive-in movie becomes a drive-in amphitheatre.



A more serious example, following a number of oil-tanker disasters in recent years, is this panel from *Black Gold*, in which the begrimed seabird has a premonition of the pollution to come.

Sometimes anachronisms provide the theme for an entire adventure, as in *Mansions of the Gods*, which lampoons modern housing developments. More often they appear as incidental details. Importantly, however, anachronistic jokes are almost always related to the Roman, not the Gaulish, lifestyle.

These jokes make us look twice at some of the more absurd aspects of modern, 'civilised' life – the ones that we take for granted simply because we have got used to them. (A good example is the high-rise block of flats depicted in *Soothsayer* page 9, panel 8.) They make us take a step back and look at the world from a different perspective. And this is of course what Asterix does in his own way: he points out the absurdities of the equally 'civilised' Roman lifestyle.



### LEVEL 3

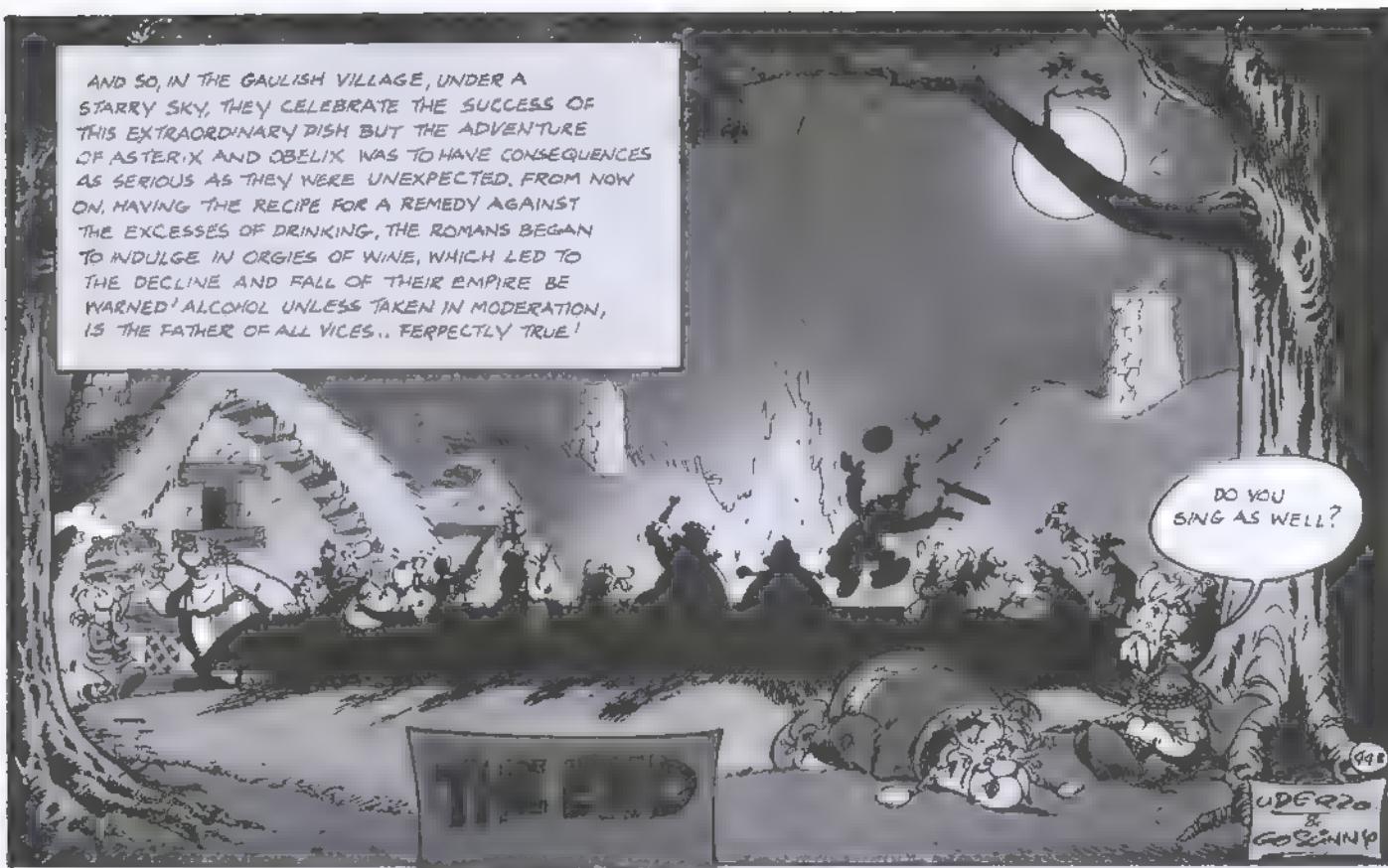
## The Ultimate Historical Figure

SOMETIMES the authors go beyond anachronism, and show Asterix and Obelix actively influencing the history of the real world. So the Gauls are inadvertently responsible for bringing tea to the British, bull-fighting to the Spanish and climbing-ropes to the Swiss. In *Great Crossing* they discover America before the Vikings, and there is even the claim, in the final panel of *Laurel Wreath*, that Asterix is personally responsible for the fall of the Roman Empire (see overleaf, top).

The effect of these jokes is to knock the stuffing out of received ideas and national institutions. Once again, Asterix is cocking a snook at authority, and this time it is the authority of History itself. For the gag to work however, it has to be convincing, and this is why the precision of Uderzo's research is so



AND SO, IN THE GAULISH VILLAGE, UNDER A STARRY SKY, THEY CELEBRATE THE SUCCESS OF THIS EXTRAORDINARY DISH BUT THE ADVENTURE OF ASTERIX AND OBELIX WAS TO HAVE CONSEQUENCES AS SERIOUS AS THEY WERE UNEXPECTED. FROM NOW ON, HAVING THE RECIPE FOR A REMEDY AGAINST THE EXCESSES OF DRINKING, THE ROMANS BEGAN TO INDULGE IN ORGIES OF WINE, WHICH LED TO THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THEIR EMPIRE BE WARNED! ALCOHOL UNLESS TAKEN IN MODERATION, IS THE FATHER OF ALL VICES.. FERPECTLY TRUE!



important. To take just one example: when Obelix breaks the Sphinx's nose off in *Cleopatra* (above), the Sphinx itself is extremely accurately portrayed – in fact it is hardly even drawn in 'cartoon' style. So the reader can relish the strange sensation of Asterix (or in this case Obelix) cheekily reaching out from his world into our own, and laughing at it.

There is also a nationalistic angle to these jokes. Goscinny and Uderzo are depicting the French as the originators of ideas later gratefully adopted by other countries. But the joke is double-edged: by inflating Asterix's role in world history to absurd proportions, it mocks the Frenchman's natural assumption of his own national superiority.



## A FEW MORE OF THE GAULS

### GERIATRIX

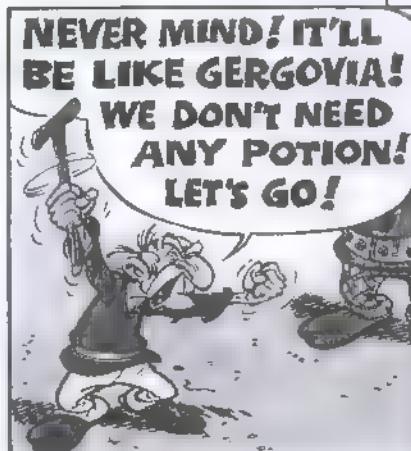
Poor Fui'automatix! Until *Asterix at the Olympic Games* (1968) he could only vent his spleen on Cacofonix. But the Olympics brought him a new sparring partner in the shape of the Village Elder, Geriatrix. The ironmonger has no chance against the pensioner. It would be dishonourable to bash one so old, so he is at the mercy of the old man's ceaseless haranguing, and can only whimper, 'Won't someone please make him shut up?'

Geriatrix's ironic French name is Agecanonix, meaning 'Canonical age', ie the age beyond which the French clergy are permitted to employ female servants. The irony lies in the fact that, even though Geriatrix is well beyond canonical

age, no female servant would be safe under his roof

Strangely for the oldest character in the Village, Geriatrix's main trait is his youthfulness. He has more energy than the other Gauls claims he doesn't need any magic potion, is extremely active in local politics (*Caesar's Gift*) and, most intriguing of all, is married to the most glamorous woman in the Village.

The nameless Mrs Geriatrix seems to be the only one who can keep her husband under control. He comes and goes at her merest whim, and stays at home washing up while she is out with her friends.



### DOGMATIX

Like penicillin and central locking, Dogmatix is one of those brilliant little discoveries that, once there, you simply cannot do without.

Uderzo originally created him as a one-book wonder: a little dog sitting outside a butcher's shop in *Asterix and the Banquet*, who scampers unnoticed after Obelix for the rest of the story: quite literally a running gag.

But he was to become much more than that.

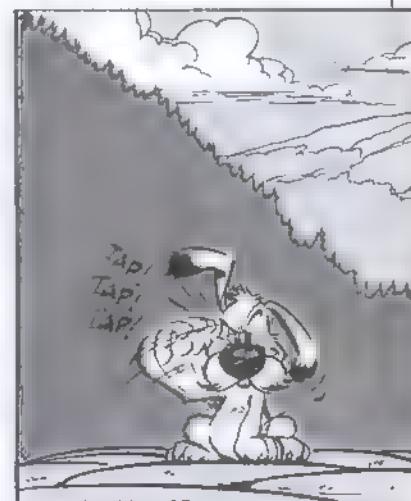
'We didn't want to keep the dog as a character', says Uderzo. 'We made one joke with him in *Banquet*, but then the readers of *Plote* wrote to us saying, "On, this little dog, what is his name? We want to see him again!" So, *voilà!*'

*Plote* held a competition to choose a name for Obelix's faithful companion, and the winning entry was Idéfix ('Fixed idea'). It was first used by Obelix on page 8 of *Asterix and Cleopatra*, and Dogmatix went on to save the day twice in that very story.

So why is Dogmatix so popular? Obviously he is extremely cute. But more importantly, he is the ideal partner for Obelix.

Far from being a fat idiot, Obelix is a complex, unpredictable character. Goscinny said, 'I don't try to make Obelix seem stupid. I see him more as an adult with the naive reactions of a very young child. These reactions don't stop him from having flashes of intelligence, even craftiness and malice. But don't forget, the main aim of every character is to make people laugh... so I give him contradictory reactions. Sometimes I like him to behave the way the reader expects, sometimes not.'

When Obelix is behaving like an adult, Dogmatix behaves like his child. And when Obelix is being childish, Dogmatix adopts the mantle of long-suffering maturity. They balance each other perfectly. In fact, Dogmatix makes us laugh at the Gauls in exactly the same way as the Gauls make us laugh at the Romans (turn to *Chieftain's Shield* page 35 for an example). In the end, Dogmatix is human: jealous, haughty, selfish, fun-loving and faithful, but above all ruled by his emotions, and not his brain.



## Boiled Boar and Cheese with Holes

EVER since *Olympic Games* (1968), Asterix has alternated between 'home' and 'away' fixtures, which means a large percentage of the comedy is based on the strange behaviour of foreigners. The idea of the 'travelling commentator' is a traditional French literary device. It goes back to the eighteenth-century writer/traveller Montesquieu, author of *Persian Letters* (1721), and the device has been imitated ever since.<sup>32</sup>

The conventional format is that a traveller from a presumably naive, 'primitive' country (in this case Asterix) comments on the curious customs, language, ideas and values of his hosts (Montesquieu's book could probably be subtitled *These Persians are Crazy*). This device is very useful for double-edged satire, since it places both the traveller and the foreigner in contrast with each other.

Following this tradition, the Asterix books overflow with stereotyped foreigners:

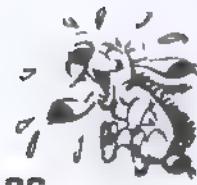


Switzerland: The Swiss maintain discreet bank accounts for secret investors (left).



Spain: The Spanish dance a mean Flamenco.

Britain: The British stop work for two days out of every seven.



And so it goes on, with goose-stepping Goths, haughty Corsicans and brave, not-so-little Belgians. One important characteristic is shared by them all: beneath the surface, each of them hates the Romans.

It has already been noted (see page 34) that the authors did not intend to cause offence with these national and international jokes. They do not after all make fun of a nation, but of the way that nation is seen by others.

Unfortunately, this subtlety was lost on the North London Borough of Brent in 1983. At that time Brent Council removed all Asterix (and Tintin) books from library shelves throughout the borough. The reason: Asterix was seen as a racist. The loss turned out to be temporary however. After a public controversy and some well-reasoned newspaper articles, the books were reinstated.

## LEVEL 5

### Optical Illusions

UNTIL Asterix was invented, a cartoon strip was the last place you would expect to find a Rembrandt masterpiece.

But Goscinny and Uderzo constantly borrowed from the world's great artists, writers and film-makers to create another, more eclectic level of humour, previously unknown to the world of cartoons: artistic parody.

Right is *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp* by the great seventeenth-century Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn.

Compare it with the illustration overleaf from *Asterix and the Soothsayer*.





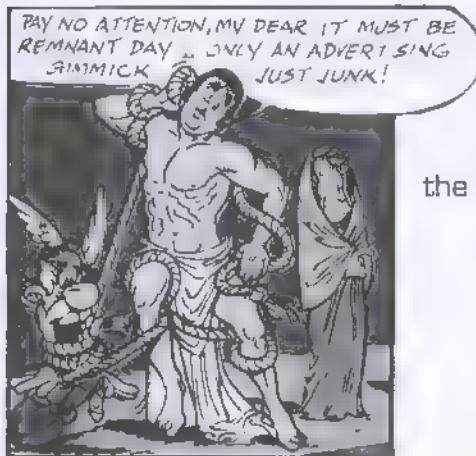
Uderzo carefully mimics every element of Rembrandt's painting: all the characters' expressions are comically exaggerated. But the big joke is saved for the grim centrepiece, a dead body, which becomes a rather stale fish.

The choice of this particular picture is not arbitrary. The historical

Dr Tulp, like Prolix the Soothsayer, was highly successful in his day, but was afterwards thought to be something of a quack (he is known to have recommended that a patient drink fifty cups of tea a day as a cure). To echo this picture in *Soothsayer* underlines the fact that Prolix is no more than a skilled con-man.



Above: The statuesque, arrogant slave in *Laurel Wreath* is constantly mimicking famous statues. He tries to emulate Rodin's *The Thinker* (left).



the Greek *Laocoön*





and Myron's *Discobolus*.

Unfortunately, his dignity keeps being undermined by Asterix, who infiltrates each panel.

We have already seen, on page 66, how Géricault's *The Raft of the 'Medusa'* is mimicked in *Asterix the Legionary*. Unlike Uderzo's parody of Rembrandt, the comedy here is intensified by the *differences* rather than the *similarities* in the figures. When Géricault was working on this painting, he studied dying men, shaved his head, and locked himself in his studio with corpses borrowed from the local morgue, in an attempt to make the painting as harrowing as possible. And where Géricault's figures exude human suffering, Uderzo's just look fed up.

Other parodies include the orgy scene in *Switzerland* page 7, which is taken from Federico Fellini's film *Satyricon*; the banquet on page 47 of *Belgium*, inspired by Pieter Breughel the Elder's *Peasant Wedding* (right);





and of course the games of cards and boules in *Banquet*, from Pagnol's *Marius and Fanny*.

Literary allusions are also fair game for Asterix. In *Spain* the Gauls meet Cervantes' characters Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (left);

in *Great Crossing* (left) Chief Odiuscomparissen quotes from *Hamlet*:

and in several books Julius Caesar quotes his own classical remarks (below left and below and right top).





Goscinny's literary parody and Uderzo's artistic mimicry both chip away at the sanctity in which great art is often held, making it shed some of its aura of authority. The authors have stood up against their own awe-inspiring forebears in the name of individuality – just as the Gauls stand up to the authority of Rome.

## LEVEL 6

### The Visual Pun

GOSCINNY dotted the Asterix books with verbal humour, and Uderzo kept pace with him, filling his panels with the pictorial equivalent: elegant visual jokes:



The wristwatch sundial in *Asterix in Britain* is a physical impossibility, since sundials have to stand in a fixed position relative to the sun.

## AND A FEW OF THE OTHERS

### THE PIRATES

Pity the pirates! Condemned to an eternity of sinkings, scuttings and runnings aground, there never was a group of people less suited to their chosen career in life. Like so many of the minor characters in Asterix, the pirates were not intended to be a regular feature. They first appeared in *Asterix the Gladiator*, and just kept coming back for more.



The chief pirate himself is a caricature of a now-defunct Pilote character from the early sixties, Barbe Rouge ('Redbeard'), created by the writer Jean-Michel Charlier and the artist Hubinon. And the chief's son Erix, who appears briefly in *Asterix and the Banquet* before being left as a deposit on a new ship, is a parody of Barbe Rouge's own son [There cannot be many examples of caricatures outliving the very things they were invented to mock.]

An even less convincing pirate than the chief is his second-in-command: a one-legged pessimist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of conciliatory Latin quotations. Between these two and their pun-addicted Numidian lookout man, the pirates are congenitally incapable of ever winning . . . or are they? Out of the twenty-nine Asterix books, they do win once, quite by chance, in *Asterix and the Cauldron*, when much to their astonishment, a cauldron full of onion-flavoured sestertii falls on their ship.

And are they evil? Not at all. In fact quite the opposite. Like the Roman legionaries, they provide a very valuable service. The Gauls live entirely for the indiscriminate fun of bashing Romans and pirates – often without the slightest provocation. So Romans and pirates exist purely and simply for the Gauls to bash. This, sad to say, is their mission in life. So do not hate them. Pity them.



### JULIUS CAESAR

As a real, and by any standards fairly major, historical figure, Julius Caesar must find it infuriating to be permanently pestered by a bunch of non-existent cartoon characters. You can feel his frustration at this predicament in *Asterix the Legionary*, when his high-level meeting is constantly interrupted by Asterix's comrades; and in *Asterix in Belgium*, when he erupts, 'I'VE NO IDEA WHO ARE THE BRAVEST! ALL I KNOW IS THAT YOU'RE ALL EQUALY CRAZY!!!'

After twenty centuries of rest Caesar has been dragooned into the service of Goscinny and Uderzo, and he must suffer the indignity as best he can. But such is the strength of his character that, even when cast as the master villain of the entire series, he manages occasionally to rise above the petty stupidities of his underlings, and to show true nobility.

On several occasions he grants favours to the Gauls (for instance in *Gladiator*, *Legionary* and *Son*), and how do they repay him? By stealing his laurel wreath, summoning him to settle their petty wagers and teaching his gladiators to play 'silly atrium games'. But their reconciliation at the end of *Asterix and Son* is the Gauls' way of showing that, at heart, they respect their enemy – and they are grateful to him for keeping them so well-supplied with fist-fodder over the years.

Caesar does have some annoying habits, though. He loves quoting from his own works of literature, and he always talks about himself in the third person. Like many high-achievers, he hates losing bets (as in *Cleopatra*), and he sometimes shows a rather sadistic sense of humour (as when he awards the Gaulish Village to Tremensdelirjs at the start of *Caesar's Gift*).

So is Caesar, in the end, good or evil? The answer is: both. On the one hand he wants to destroy the Gaulish Village, but on the other he is only trying to preserve peace in his occupied countries. As the books progress his plans become more crafty, but he himself becomes more and more likeable.

The final word on Caesar comes from Uderzo: 'I have a lot of respect for my characters. The more you know a character, the more he comes to life; and the more he lives, the more you, in turn, understand him.'



Above: Cacofonix brushes leftover musical notes off his balcony in *Goths*.

This joke had already served Goscinny and Uderzo in *Gaul* (right), and it was to come in useful thirty years later in *Secret Weapon* (far right).

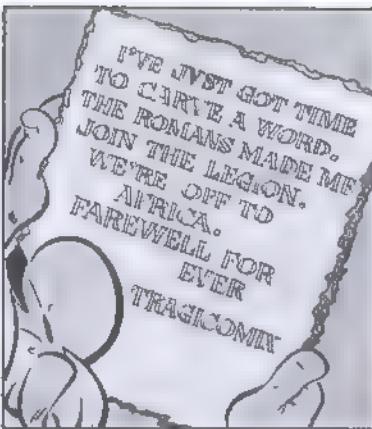


A more subtle touch is the legwear of Cleverdix and Majestix in *Great Divide* (right).



Earlier in this adventure Cleverdix's trousers have horizontal stripes and Majestix's vertical. Their final reconciliation is exemplified in their clothing: both are wearing checked trousers.



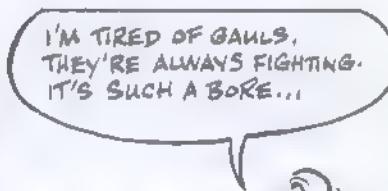


Obelix's heart is broken by the news that Panacea is engaged.

## LEVEL 7

### Guest Stars and Cameo Roles

**C**ARICATURES pop up repeatedly in the Asterix series. Most non-French readers will have noticed Laurel and Hardy in *Obelix and Co.* (right), the Beatles in *Britain* (below right) and Sean Connery playing a major part in *Black Gold* (below left).



Particularly eagle-eyed fans might even have spotted Charles Laughton in *Golden Sickle* (right).

But the vast majority of caricatures are based on French celebrities, and to enjoy them you have to know a little about



the person involved. For instance, the glum-looking character beside the lion in *Laurel Wreath* (right) is Jean Richard, an actor who runs a zoo and a circus outside Paris.

And the champion Belgian cyclist Eddy Merckx appears in *Belgium* (below right). Of course, bicycles had not been invented in 50 BC, so Merckx has to run – although he does so in a cycling posture.

It is often possible to tell if a face in an Asterix adventure is a caricature or an original invention, even without knowing its real-life source. Uderzo explains why: 'It's because I draw my caricatures less grotesquely than my made-up faces. There are many caricatures, but Asterix himself is not based on any real person. I get lots of letters from readers saying "I know someone who looks just like Obelix" though. There are Obelixes everywhere! And we once had a Prime Minister in France – Michel Rocard – who was known in parliament as "Asterix". He was quite small.'



THE BELGIANS ARE GETTING  
READY FOR BATTLE TOO. FAST  
RUNNERS ARE SENT TO ROUSE  
THE NEIGHBOURING TRIBES...



## LEVEL 8

### Another Fine Mess . . .

**I**N THEIR youth, both Goscinny and Uderzo had been fans of the great film comedians Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and particularly Laurel and Hardy. While working for World Press they used to enjoy quoting Oliver Hardy's famous catchphrase at each other: 'That's another fine mess you've gotten me into!' (Eventually of course they gave Obelix – whose bulk recalls that of Hardy – his own catchphrase: 'These Romans are crazy!')

Asterix uses many of the techniques of those silent movies as a source of comedy. There is slapstick, the clearest example of which is the substitution of fish for the traditional custard pies (overleaf, top left).





There is also the double-take (above).

Pratfalls are very common (left).

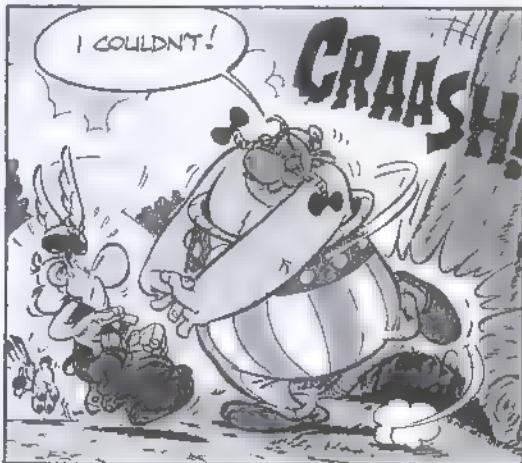
And the action sequences are full of Keystone Kops-style mayhem (below).



Strip cartoons and cinema are very closely linked to each other. A film, like a cartoon, is made up of a sequence of individual, still images. But film moves from one image to the next so quickly that the eye is unable to distinguish them and sees them as one moving picture. The skill of the cartoonist is to select only the most important moments of frozen action and leave the readers to imagine the movements between each picture. Much of our pleasure comes from 'filling in the gaps'. One of Uderzo's greatest qualities as a cartoonist is his ability to find those vital, climactic frozen moments with unerring accuracy. It is this skill that gives his pictures their irresistible sense of rhythm.

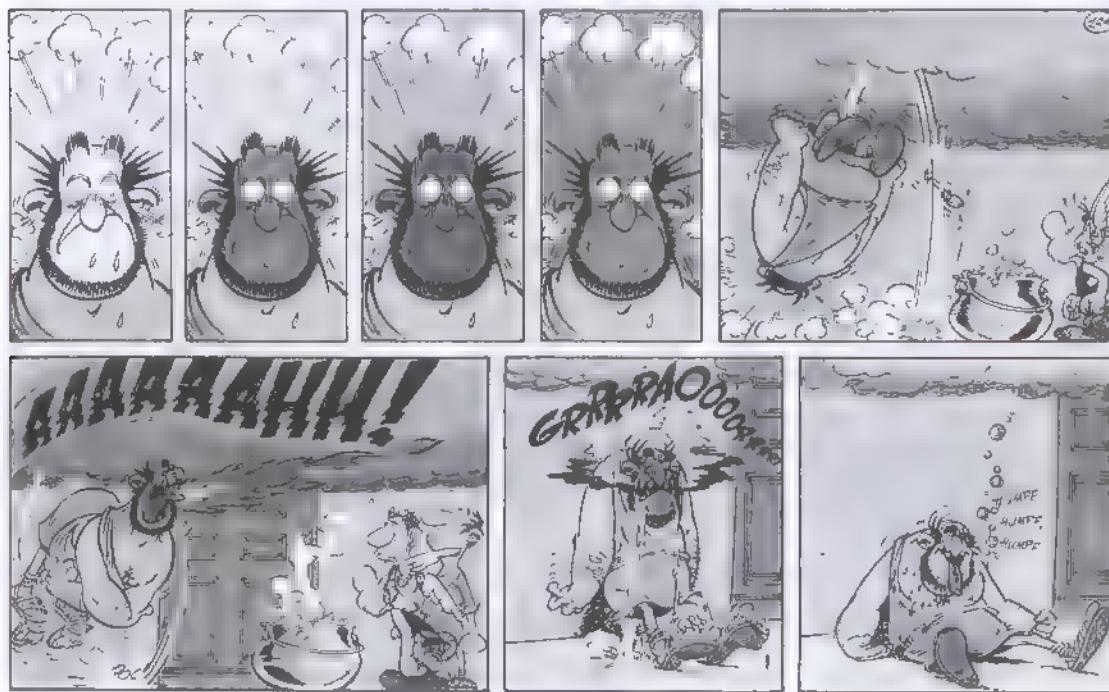


Uderzo's technique is to show the crucial start and end of an action. For example, when Obelix kicks over Cacofonix's tree in *Legionary* (below), you can



visualise his graceful movement from one picture to the next. The kick alone, taken out of context, has far less sense of movement, and is less funny as a result. Try covering up the first picture, and experience the difference.

Uderzo is also a master at picking out the key moments in an extended sequence of actions, where showing only the start and end would be inappropriate. Look, for example, at Goldendelicius tasting Asterix's somewhat suspicious example of *haute cuisine* in *Laurel Wreath* (below).



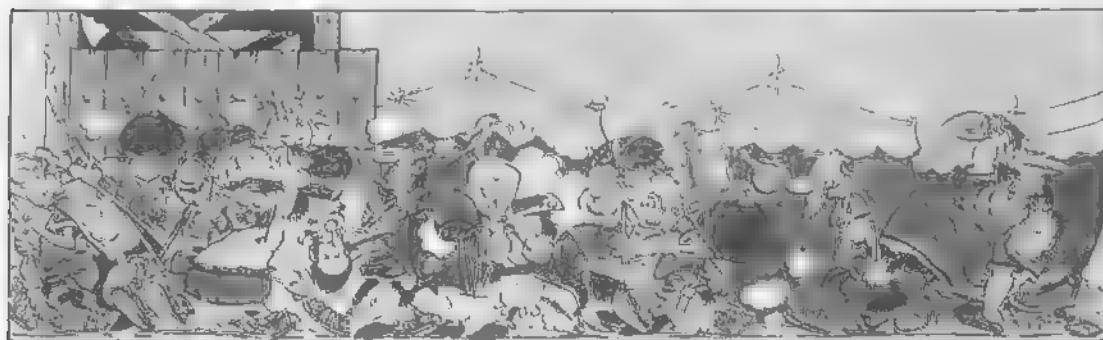
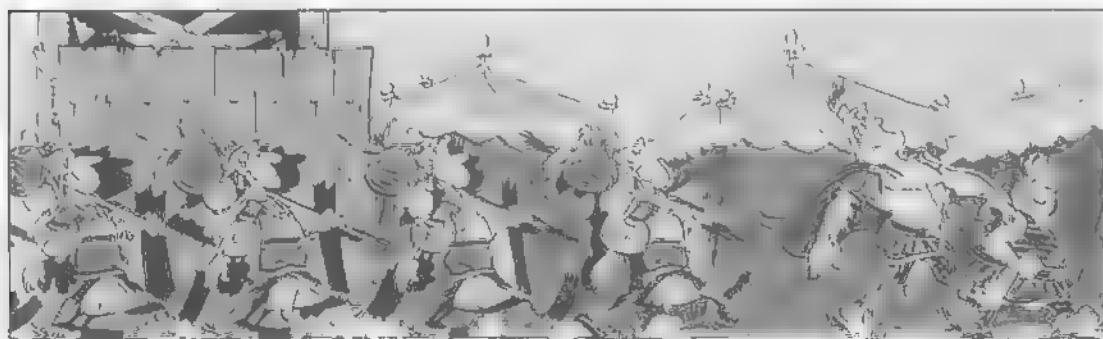
This movement between individual frames has led at least one French critic<sup>33</sup> to suggest that the essential part of any comic strip is the spaces between the panels: 'A frame in isolation from those surrounding it loses a



great part of its meaning . . . There is often an implied cause and effect between frames that can be used to create surprise or humour by deceiving the expectations of the reader. The movement in the *bande dessinée* mostly occurs in the blanks.

'That the blanks do reveal the essence of the medium is suggested by an interview with Morris, the creator of *Lucky Luke*, the cowboy who draws faster than his shadow. Morris describes adapting a story for an animated film cartoon. In the original, *Lucky Luke* is in the bar holding a glass. He notices something, leaves hold of the glass, draws his gun, shoots, replaces the gun in the holster still smoking, and catches his glass before it has fallen even to the bar. That joke, spread over five frames, is, claims Morris, impossible to reproduce in cartoon animation.'<sup>34</sup>

The first *Asterix* film, *Asterix the Gaul*, suffers from this syndrome in my view. It was made with virtually no input from Goscinny and Uderzo, and simply works its way through the album, creating animation by 'inbetweening' from panel to panel.



One of Uderzo's favourite methods of creating comedy is to use those gaps between pictures to create many 'before and after' jokes: comic contrasts between two almost identical scenes. You can see this in *Obelix and Co* (above), where the discipline of the incoming garrison is mirrored by the disarray of the outgoing one.

Or in *Corsica* where Carferrix's stare reduces Courtingdisastus to a nervous wreck (opposite top).





### THE GAG

## Asterix's Real Weapon

**C**OMEDY is at the heart of Asterix. Not only is 'faire rire' – making people laugh – the number one aim of his creators, but laughter is also the Gauls' most powerful weapon. As we have seen, all Asterix's different comic techniques have similar goals: to deflate pomposity, regimentation, bureaucracy

and militarism. The real strength of the Gauls comes not from the magic potion, but from their sense of humour. It is their laughter and mockery which unnerves the legions of Rome – as is clear from an important panel in *Big Fight*; the potion merely gives them the freedom to act naturally (above).

'The humour of Asterix is humane', wrote one critic.<sup>35</sup> 'It hurts, degrades, humiliates no one.' The same is true of Goscinny and Uderzo's brand of violence. When Asterix hits a Roman, the effect is never harmful. If anything, it is beneficial. An unconscious Roman often wears a carefree smile, as though the merest contact with the Gauls has released him from the yoke of Imperial oppression.

The effect is much the same on readers. Contact with Asterix encourages us to laugh in the face of authority.

Asterix cannot change the real world, any more than he can defeat the entire Roman Empire. But he can laugh at it. He represents, for readers, a tongue-in-cheek protest, a temporary release from their world, and a small reminder that nothing should be taken too seriously.

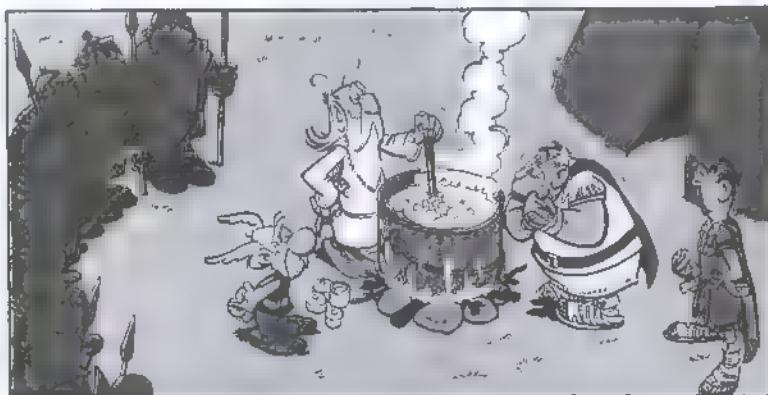


## BONUS SECTION 4

# NOBODY'S PERFECT



Despite all the detailed research Goscinny and Uderzo did when preparing a new Asterix book, a few factual mistakes have crept in over the years. Those presented here were all pointed out to Albert Uderzo by knowledgeable and observant readers.<sup>36</sup>



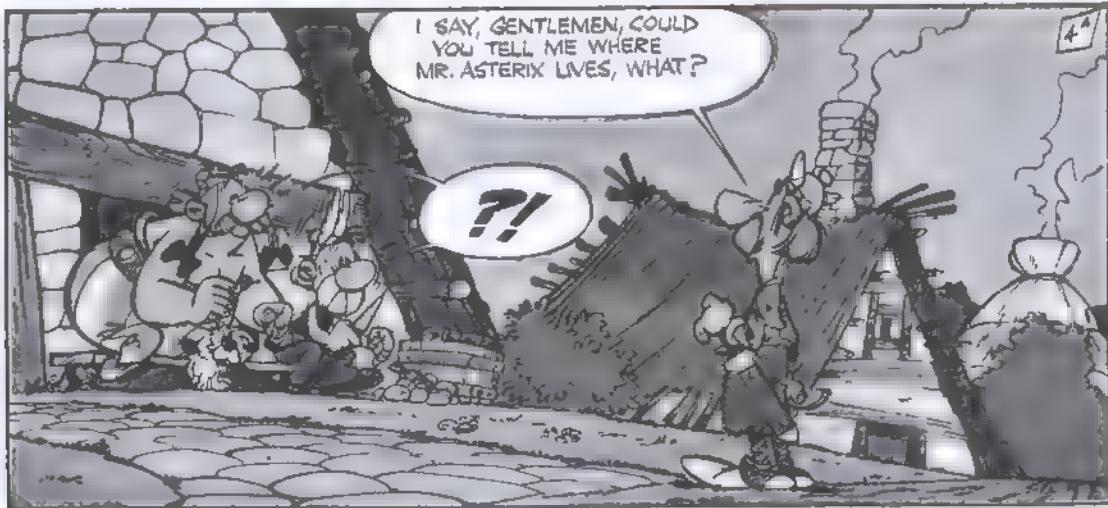
*Gaul:* in the early days of Asterix, Getafix's cauldron would have been impossible to carry. Look at the handle-supports, and then try and imagine lifting the handle up: it simply would not work.



After this had been pointed out to the artist, he gave the druid a new cauldron (*Roman Agent*).

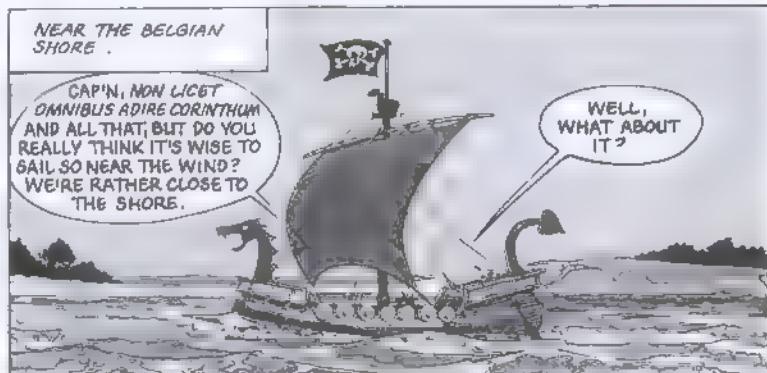


The avenue of rams at the Temple of Luxor (in *Asterix and Cleopatra*) should have been an avenue of Sphinxes. The rams were located at Knossos on Crete.



*Britain:* potatoes had certainly not reached France by 50 BC. Indeed, if Anticlimax had noticed what Asterix was peeling, he could have introduced them to England approximately one thousand six hundred years before Walter Raleigh.

*Belgium:* the Belgian coastline consists entirely of wide beaches. There are no trees, no grassy areas and no cliffs.



*Britain:* the double-decker bus is an accurate piece of local English colour. But it should be driving on the other side of the road – especially since Anticlimax explained the bizarre English driving conventions only seven pages earlier.

# GLOSSARY OF LATIN PHRASES IN ASTERIX

IN COMPILING this glossary I have quoted extensively from and I am grateful to *A Dictionary of Latin Tags and Phrases* by Eugene Ehrlich.

## **Acta est fabula**

'It's all over'. Lit: 'The drama has been acted out'. Attributed to the Emperor Augustus just before he died.

## **Alea jacta est**

'The die is cast'. One of Caesar's favourite remarks in Asterix. In 49 BC, when Governor of Gaul, he was preparing to enter Rome from Gaul by crossing the Rubicon River. This move would, he knew, be seen as direct defiance of his government. After making his decision and crossing the river, according to Plutarch and Suetonius, he declared 'Alea jacta est'.

## **Audaces fortuna juvat**

'Fortune favours the bold.'

## **Auri sacra fames**

'The cursed hunger for gold.' Virgil's phrase for those who live only to acquire wealth.

## **Aut Caesar, aut nihil**

'Either Caesar or nothing'. Also has the general meaning of 'All or nothing'.

## **Ave atque vale**

'Hail and farewell!' Catullus used this expression in closing a poem on the death of his brother.

## **Ave Caesar morituri te salutant!**

'Hail, Caesar! Those who are about to die salute you!' Traditional declaration of gladiators before combat.

## **Beati pauperes spiritu**

'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' The opening words of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew's Gospel.



## **Bis repetita placent**

'The things that please are repeated again and again.' A phrase of Horace's decrying the fact that great works of art tend to be imitated *ad infinitum*.

## **Caveat emptor**

'Let the buyer beware.' The rule of law warning potential purchasers that they are not protected during a transaction against failure of the sellers to live up to the bargain except to the extent that the sales contract stipulates.

## **Cogito ergo sum**

'I think therefore I am.' The starting point for Descartes' philosophic system in his *Discourse on Method*

## **Contraria contrariis curantur**

'Opposites are cured by opposites'. The principle that diseases should be fought by using remedies that produce effects totally different from those of the disease itself.

## **De facto**

'In reality'.

## **De mortuis nil nisi bonum**

'Speak nothing but good of the dead.' Attributed to Chilon of Sparta, one of the wise men of sixth century BC Greece.

## **Delenda Carthago**

'Carthage must be destroyed!' The phrase of Cato the Elder to the Roman Senate, urging war against Carthage, the ancient enemy of Rome. The Carthaginians had already been defeated in the first two Punic Wars (264-241 BC and 218-201 BC). Carthage itself was destroyed in the Third Punic War (149-146 BC) after Cato's incitement.

## **Desinit in pisces mulier formosa superne**

'A woman who is beautiful above ends in a fishtail.' From Horace's *De Arte Poetica*. Horace is explaining that poetry should have a sense of unity or it will be like a mermaid: half one thing, half another. In the pirates' case the line has a more literal meaning: they encountered the women above the water, and ended amongst the fishes.

## **Diem perdidit**

'I have lost the day'. Attributed to the Emperor Titus after passing an entire day without doing a good deed.

## **Dignus est intrare**

'He is worthy to enter.' From the burlesque ceremony in Moliere's *Le Malade Imaginaire* ('The Hypochondriac')

## **Donec eris felix, multos numerabis amicos**

'As long as you are fortunate, you will have many friends.'

From Ovid's *Tristia*

## **Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori**

'It is sweet and fitting to die for the Fatherland'. A quotation from Horace's *Odes*.

## **Errare humanum est**

'To err is human.'

## **Et nunc, reges, intelligite, erudimini, qui judicati terram**

'And now, kings, understand, you who decide the fate of the Earth, educate yourselves.'

Words of the psalmist chosen as a text by Bossuet for a funeral oration for Henriette-Anne d'Angleterre, who died in 1670. The phrase is used to remind us that we should profit from others' experience.

## **Et tu, Brute**

'You too, Brutus'. According to Plutarch, when Caesar was assassinated he resisted his attackers' knives until he saw that Brutus was amongst them. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, 'Et tu, Brute! Then fall Caesar' is his dying line.

## **Exegi monumentum aere perennius**

'I have raised a monument more durable than bronze.' The opening words of Horace's final

ode. He was suggesting that his work would bring him immortality.

### **Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas**

'Fortunate is he who has been able to learn the causes of things.' From Virgil's *Georgics*.

### **Fluctuat nec mergitur**

'It is tossed by the waves but does not sink.' This is the motto of the City of Paris, which has a ship as its emblem.

### **Gloria victis**

'Glory to the defeated.'

### **Gnothe seauton** (Greek)

'Know thyself.' The inscription over the shrine of the Oracle at Delphi which Socrates took as his motto.

### **Ipsa facta**

Lit: 'by that very fact'. Has the meaning of 'absolutely, regardless of all other considerations'.

### **Ira furor brevis est**

'Anger is a brief madness.' From Horace's *Epistles*.

### **Ita est**

'Thus it is.' A Latin form of saying 'Yes.'

### **Ita diis placuit**

'Thus it pleased the gods.'

### **Maior e longinquu reverentia**

Lit: 'Greater reverence from afar.' The phrase concerns the human tendency not to notice faults when people or things are viewed, figuratively, from a distance.

### **Mens sana in corpore sano**

'A sound mind in a sound body.' From Juvenal's *Satires*.

### **Morituri te salutant**

See *Ave Caesar morituri te salutant*.

### **Non omnia possumus omnes**

'We cannot all do everything.' From Virgil's *Aeneid*.

### **Non licet omnibus adire**

### **Corinthum**

'Not everyone is permitted to go to Corinth.' From Horace's *Epistles*. Corinth was a city of abundant pleasures in its day. But its luxuries were too expensive for many people.

### **Nunc est bibendum**

'Now it is time to drink.' A call to celebrate, from Horace's *Odes*.

### **O tempora, o mores**

Lit: 'Oh! the times! Oh! the

habits!' Part of Cicero's attack on Catiline in the Roman senate. The phrase has become a legacy for all who wish to decry the times they live in.

### **O fortunates nimium, sua si bona norint agricolas**

'Oh! blessed beyond all bliss are the farmers, if they but knew their happiness.' A line from Virgil's *Georgics*, meaning that the farmers are blessed because they are far removed from the dangers facing soldiers.

### **Panem et circenses**

'Bread and circuses.' Juvenal said that Romans had come to care for nothing but free hand-outs and spectacular events.

*Panem et circenses* was thus the favourite formula for Roman leaders who wanted to keep the allegiance of the masses.

### **Pax Romana**

'Roman Peace.' The peace dictated by the Roman legions.

### **Plaudite cives!**

'Applaud, citizens!' The call to an audience at the end of a Roman play.

### **Qui habet aures audiendi audiat**

'He who has ears, let him understand how to listen.' A Biblical epithet.

### **Quid novi?**

'What's new?'

### **Quis, quod, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando?**

'Who, what, where, in what ways, why, how, when?' Quintilian's technical hexametre whereby truth is arrived at in criminal investigations.

### **Quo vadis**

'Whither goest thou?' Quoted from John's Gospel.

### **Quod erat demonstrandum**

'We have proved the proposition we set out to prove.' (Lit: 'Which was to be demonstrated').

### **Quomodo vales**

'How are you?'

### **Quot capita, tot sensus**

'There are as many opinions as there are heads.' This saying is a pun on the original Latin 'Quot capita, tot census', a reference to the Roman method of conducting censuses, by simple head-counting.

### **Quousque tandem?**

'How long?' The first words of Cicero's speech against Catiline when the latter dared to appear at the Senate after his plot against the Republic had been discovered (see *O tempora, o mores*).

### **Redde Caesari quae sunt Caesari**

'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.' The full phrase, from Matthew's Gospel, is 'Reddite quae sunt Caesari Caesari, et quae sunt Dei Deo', 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.'

### **Ruber et Niger**

'Red and Black.'

### **Si vis pacem**

'If you want peace...' The phrase, from *Epitoma Rei Militaris* by the military writer Vegetius, concludes 'para bellum', 'Prepare for war.'

### **Sic ad nauseam**

'And so on to the point of causing nausea.' Applied to anything unpleasant that seems to go endlessly, like Latin glossaries.

### **Sic transit gloria**

The full phrase is 'Sic transit gloria mundi', meaning 'Thus passes away the glory of the world.' A phrase from *De Imitatione Christi* by Thomas à Kempis, it is used at a pope's coronation.

### **Singularis Porcus**

'Wild boar'.

### **Sol lucet omnibus**

'The sun shines for everyone.'

### **Sursum corda**

'Lift up your hearts.' A phrase heard in the Mass.

### **Timeo Danaos et Dona ferentes**

'I fear the Greeks even when bearing gifts'. The line comes from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and is spoken by the Trojan priest Laocoön wisely advising his fellow-citizens not to accept the Greeks' gift of a large wooden horse. As a motto it has the general sense 'When an enemy appears friendly, watch out!'



### **Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant**

'Where they create desolation, they call it peace.' Quoted from a defeated leader of the Britons in Tacitus' *Agricola*.

### **Uti, non abuti**

Lit: 'To use, not abuse.' Has the meaning of 'Treat with respect.'

### **Vade retro**

'Get thee behind me.' An abbreviation of Jesus' phrase from Mark's Gospel, 'Vade retro me, Satana', 'Get thee behind me, Satan.'

### **Vae victo, vae victis**

'Woe to the vanquished man, woe to the vanquished people.' Attributed by Livy to Brennus, a chief of the Gauls arranging terms of peace with the Romans in 390 BC. When the Romans complained that the Gauls were using excessive weights in measuring the amount of gold the Romans

were to pay, Brennus threw his sword onto the scales, exclaiming, 'Vae victis'. He was reminding the Romans that they were in no position to complain.

### **Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas**

'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' The phrase is from *Ecclesiastes*, and uses 'vanity' in the sense of 'fruitlessness'.

### **Veni vidi vici**

'I came, I saw, I conquered.' Caesar's favourite catchphrase. Plutarch reports him saying this after his victory in 47 BC over Pharnaces, King of Pontus.

### **Veritas odium parit**

'Truth breeds hatred.' Terence, in *Andria*, telling us it is not always wise to be frank with one's friends.

### **Victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni**

'The victorious cause pleased the gods; the defeated one

pleased Cato.' A quotation from Lucan's *Pharsalia*.

### **Victurus te saluto**

'He who is about to win salutes you.' The opposite of the traditional gladiatorial declaration (see *Morituri te salutant*).

### **Video meliora proboque deteriora sequor**

'Even though I know better, I keep on doing the wrong thing.' A line from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, lit: 'I see the better way and approve it, but I follow the worse way.'

### **Vinum et musica laetificant cor**

'Wine and music gladden the heart.' From *Ecclesiasticus* 20:40, in the *Apocrypha*.

### **Vis comica**

'Sense of humour.' From an epigram by Caesar himself about the playwright Terence.



## **NOTES IN TEXT**

- 1 Interview in *L'Express*, 23-28 July, 1974
- 2 From *Uderzo de Flamberge à Astérix*, by Christian Philippson, Editions Philippson, 1985
- 3 Ibid
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- 5 See Russel B. Nye's article *Death of a Gaulois: René Goscinny and Astérix* in *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol 14, 1980
- 6 *L'Express*, 23-28 July, 1974
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- 8 Ibid
- 9 Ibid
- 10 *Les Auteurs par la Bande - Goscinny*
- 11 Most notably *L'Echo des Savanes* and *Fluide Glacial*
- 12 *Asterix: das Trivialepos Frankreichs* by André Stoll, pub DuMont Buchverlag, Köln, 1974
- 13 *Uderzo de Flamberge à Astérix*
- 14 Interview in *Sunday Express Magazine*, 20 March 1988
- 15 This was pointed out by Jonathan Wilson in *The Observer*, 19 January 1992
- 16 Quoted in *Uderzo de Flamberge à Astérix*
- 17 *Asterix: das Trivialepos Frankreichs*
- 18 I am grateful to Julian Maddison's detailed bibliography of Goscinny's work for this information
- 19 Miranda Carter in *The Independent*, 26 October 1991
- 20 Quoted from a lecture given by Anthea Bell at the Maison Française in Oxford, December 1992
- 21 *Translator's Notebook in The Signal Approach to Children's Books*, pub. Penguin, 1980
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- 27 *Trix of the Trade* in *The Times Educational Supplement*, 2 October 1981
- 28 *The Signal Approach to Children's Books*
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- 30 Lecture at Maison Française
- 31 Quoted in Goscinny's obituary in *France-Soir*, 8 November 1977
- 32 Russell B. Nye, *op cit*
- 33 Benoit Peeters, at a colloquium entitled *Penser de la bande dessinée [d'] aujourd'hui* held in Brussels in May 1986
- 34 The Morris interview appeared in *Les Cahiers de la Bande Dessinée*, no.43, January 1980. This paragraph is quoted from chapter 9 (by Hugh Starkey) of *Contemporary France: a review of interdisciplinary studies*, ed Howorth and Roth, Pub Francis Pinter, London 1987
- 35 Russell B. Nye, *op cit*
- 36 The information in this section first appeared in *Uderzo de Flamberge à Astérix*

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